

DETERMINANTS OF PARENTAL SATISFACTION WITH A CHILD'S
DISCLOSURE OF A GAY OR LESBIAN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A Dissertation

by

ANDREW D. MILLER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2005

Major Subject: Counseling Psychology

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Daniel Brossart
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ABSTRACT

Determinants of Parental Satisfaction with a Child's Disclosure
of a Gay or Lesbian Sexual Orientation. (August 2005)

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This study was an attempt to begin to understand the phenomenon of coming out from the parental perspective. Specifically, it focused on the factors contained within a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation and their impact on a parent's satisfaction with the disclosure.

Participants were eleven parents of gay and lesbian children. Participants were interviewed individually regarding their memories of the moment that their children revealed their sexual orientations to them. Participants were asked questions about the parent/child relationship prior to the disclosure, questions about the disclosure as it actually occurred, and were also asked to describe the most ideal coming out scenario that they could imagine.

Interview data were analyzed according to the naturalistic inquiry process as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The results indicate that there are two types of components that influence parental satisfaction with the disclosure of a child's sexual orientation: relational components and process components. Relational components are those aspects of the parent/child dynamic that influence a parent's feelings of

satisfaction regarding the disclosure experience. Process components are the specific elements of the disclosure moment that influence a parent's ability to assimilate the information shared by the child and subsequently allow for the integration of that information into their schema of the child and the parent/child relationship. These two categories are discussed along with a proposed framework for understanding them as well as methods of integrating them into an individual's coming out script. The findings of the current study may be useful in helping gay and lesbian children develop more successful and accessible coming out disclosures which are targeted towards their parents. In addition, these results may guide the interventions of mental health professionals as they work with individuals who are preparing to come out to their parents. Future studies that address the specific components mentioned within this study would be useful, as would studies which address the coming out phenomenon from the perspective of other family members.

DEDICATION

To my parents

Dale & Terry Miller,

my sister

Lisa Miller,

With love, gratitude, and devotion

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way to thank all of the people who need to be thanked in the space allotted, but I will do my best. Now I know what it must feel like to give a speech at the Oscars. First and foremost, I must thank God for setting me on the path that has led me to this point. My life will never be the same for all of the people that I have met along the way and the many wonderful experiences I have had, and for that I am truly grateful.

I also have to thank two important people from my past. The first is Josh Shepherd, my best friend, who helped me to realize that my true calling was to become a psychologist, and whose strength and courage over the course of a long illness that eventually claimed his life helped me to see the strength that is in us all. I miss you Josh. Also, from back in my days at Eastern Illinois University, thanks go to Dr. Bill Kirk. Dr. Kirk is an amazing professor whose enthusiasm and passion for the field of psychology was truly contagious. He allowed me to see that one can be professional, respected, and goofy all at the same time. When and if I ever decide to grow up, Dr. Kirk is exactly who I want to be.

Thank you to the wonderful faculty in the Counseling Psychology program at Texas A&M University. You have taught me the skills that I need to become an effective therapist, and have helped me become a better person along the way. A special thanks to Dr. Donna Davenport, who taught what felt like at least 90% of the classes that I took (so if I mess anything up it's her fault). You were able to see my potential even when I could not see it myself and your care and concern for me, my fellow classmates, and the clients that we serve was both touching and inspiring.

Thanks to my dissertation committee chair Dr. Dan Brossart for taking on the equal challenges of me and my dissertation. I'll never forget our weekly Monday morning progress meetings which always contained an equal mix of me expounding upon my latest dissertation related efforts and you expounding upon your most recent acquisition of some obscure Christian Death-Metal band from Germany. I still don't know if my hearing has fully recovered. Also thanks to Drs. Collie Conoley, Mike Ash, and Patrick Slattery for serving as committee members.

I never would have survived my doctoral program without the companionship of my cohorts; Tom, Brent, Josh, Minette, and Jen. You all have meant so much to me and I will always treasure your friendship and support. We have had too many adventures together to list here and together share too many private jokes to be healthy. I look forward to laughing with you (and at you) for many years to come. I will see you all on "Psyvivor".

Susan D'Esposito, my partner in crime, once again words fail me. To the outside world ours must seem like the most unlikely of friendships, and yet it works. You already know how much your love and support mean to me so I am not going to go into that here. You helped me survive statistics class with my sanity intact and gave generously of your time to help me with an important part of my dissertation process. You are awesome, and I will never again be able to look at a fountain without thinking of you...or the police.

I would not be where I am today without my family...literally and figuratively! Mom and Dad, your support and encouragement over the years has been limitless, and

regardless of how much formal education I have had, I have learned the most from the two of you. You taught me that love and family are always enough and that I am capable of doing anything I set my mind to. I respect you both more than anyone I know and I am honored and humbled that you take pride in my accomplishments and my life.

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The thanks to my family would not be complete without a very special thank you to Toni Shepherd. I am convinced that her cookie recipe is largely responsible for my success in graduate school and I believe that my professors and peers would agree with me. In truth, a portion of this degree really belongs to those dang cookies!

Last but not least I would like to thank all of the parents who so generously gave of their time to contribute to this project. Your stories are testimonies of love, devotion, strength, and compassion and have proven to me that love truly does conquer all. You all serve as invaluable role-models for other parents of gay and lesbian children, particularly those who are just beginning their journey. I have no doubt that your stories will touch the hearts and minds of others as they face the challenges of the coming out process, regardless of which side they are facing it from.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Coming out to one's parents is a fact of life for the majority of gay or lesbian individuals. This already difficult process is made more complex by the fact that these parents are members of the same heterosexual majority that both overtly and covertly represses the rights and freedoms of the homosexual minority group. This study will attempt to contribute to our understanding of the experiences of parents whose children have come out to them so that both of these groups, as well as those in the helping professions who offer support to them, can have a better understanding of the actual process. The hope is that this knowledge will provide more accurate insights into the factors that lead to a positive and successful disclosure, and that this information in turn can be used to support those who are preparing to engage in this challenging process.

Several models that outline the coming out process exist in the literature, and empirical research exists that has investigated factors that influence a parent's reaction to the news that his or her child is either gay or lesbian. This research has been focused primarily on the content of the parents' reactions as observed by their children, with less emphasis being placed on the process underlying the parents' reactions as stated by the parents themselves. This study attempts to add to the research that exists in this area by utilizing retrospective interviews of the parents of gay men and lesbian women. Subsequently, qualitative analysis and interpretation of data was employed to develop concepts, descriptions, and hypothesis that were grounded in the interview data.

This dissertation follows the style of *The Journal of Homosexuality*.

Purpose of the Investigation

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge about how parents react when their children come out to them. Knowledge in this area may be useful for counselors in providing support to both parents and children as they navigate this tumultuous period in a family's life as well as for children as they prepare to come out to the people who are often the central support figures in their lives. The central question on which this research is based is "From a parent's perspective, how is the news that a child is either gay or lesbian best received?" Put another way, the question becomes "How can a gay or lesbian child who is in the midst of the coming out process develop the most effective disclosure scenario possible?" An obvious and effective method of answering these questions involves learning from those who have already been through the experience of having a child come out to them, and therefore possess the clarity that often accompanies hindsight.

By drawing upon the insight, experience, and understanding of those who have been on the receiving end of the coming out process, we can learn how to better assist those who are attempting to negotiate this daunting milestone. By focusing on past experiences, we can better understand the process that parents engage in as they work to absorb the impact of a child's disclosure that he or she is not a heterosexual. There is an exploration of a parent's perceptions of their child's sexual orientation prior to disclosure, and how these perceptions might have influenced the parent's reactions to the disclosure itself. We are able to see, from the participants' point of view, the thoughts and feelings that parents experience upon learning that a child is gay or lesbian. Perhaps

the biggest benefit of all involves the ability to take advantage of the participants' hindsight and learn what they would have their children do differently during the disclosure if they had it to do over again, as well as what advice they might give to children who are preparing to come out to their parents.

Research Questions

Based upon the intended purpose of the current study presented above, the following research questions were developed to guide the retrospective interviews:

Research Question 1. How does a parent's pre-disclosure relationship with a child influence his/her reaction to the disclosure/satisfaction with the disclosure?

Research Question 2. In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news easier to hear or made the news more acceptable?

Research Question 3. In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news more difficult to hear or made the news more unacceptable?

Research Question 4. How does a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of sexual orientation change over time?

Research Question 5. What is the "ideal" scenario in which a parent would prefer to have his or her child's sexual orientation disclosed?

These questions are not intended to define separate and distinct categories for investigation. Rather, they should be viewed as general topic areas which acted as an organizational context for the gathering and subsequent analysis of interview data.

Significance and Potential Contributions

Research in the area of the coming out process has been focused primarily on the experiences of the individuals who experience this process first-hand. Fewer studies have focused on the experiences of those individuals who are peripheral to the gay or lesbian individual. Parents, siblings, extended family members, close friends; all of these individuals play an important role in a person's life to a greater or lesser extent, and in a similar fashion have some influence on the who, what, when, where, and why of disclosing one's sexual orientation. The findings of this study may contribute knowledge to the theoretical literature pertaining to the experiences of some of these supporting characters as they engage in a loved one's coming out process. The results of this study may be useful to those who are preparing to come out to their parents in helping them develop a more effective disclosure scenario. Similarly, the results will likely benefit those therapists who are helping to guide gay and lesbian individuals through this process. By beginning to establish normative reactions to a child's coming out, the results may also be useful to parents who have already been through this experience, or who suspect that they might one day have this experience themselves. Furthermore, while the present study is exploratory in nature, it may identify important factors and variables embedded in a parent's experience of their child's coming out process that can be further explored by utilizing other empirical methods.

The potential dangers of disclosing a non-heterosexual sexual orientation to one's family have been well documented. For example, gay males and lesbian women are likely to be verbally threatened or physically assaulted by a parent after disclosing

their sexual orientations (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Other research has found that gay teenagers face an increased risk of homelessness after coming out to their parents, and subsequently turn to risky behaviors such as prostitution and selling drugs for survival (Hunter, 1990). These risky behaviors are also linked to an increased risk of HIV infection. Therefore, supporting individuals through the coming out process by helping them develop coming out scenarios that are more likely to be received positively could decrease the likelihood of abuse being perpetrated against a gay or lesbian individual as well as the risk of being exposed to behaviors that increase the likelihood of HIV infection.

Limitations of the Study

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that qualitative methodologies possess inherent benefits and shortcomings. The basic structure of a qualitative study typically does not allow for the large sample sizes possible in a quantitative study. Therefore, the potential to generalize results beyond the initial sample is greatly reduced. Similarly, qualitative investigations are notoriously difficult to replicate, which is a significant detriment to this type of inquiry. On the other hand, a qualitative methodology is a powerful tool when used to explore and develop theoretical constructs. Different methodologies can then be utilized to verify, validate, and expand upon the initial findings of a qualitative study.

The main limitations of the current study are those that are typical of any subjective study that utilizes retrospective interviews as the main method of data collection. Any validity ascribed to the data rests solely on the belief that research

participants were frank, candid, and sincere about their experiences. Retrospective data collection must necessarily rely upon subjective recall, and so there is an inherent risk that gathered data has been based on memories which have been inaccurately retrieved.

In any research study one must pay particular attention to the avenues through which research participants are recruited. The nature of the study and the way in which the study itself is presented can impact potential interviewees and thus influence their decision making process. The current study implies a positive attitude towards homosexuality and the formation of supportive and affirming relationships between parents and their gay or lesbian children. Therefore, it is likely that those parents who volunteered for the study possess personal values that reflect the inherent values of the research itself. Similarly, any assumptions made by interviewees regarding the purpose of the study could influence the information they choose to disclose to the interviewer.

Lastly, one aspect of the current study involves an element of advice-giving. While this advice is almost certainly well-meaning, it may or may not be beneficial in all cases, or even a small number of cases. In order to determine the actual validity and efficacy of the advice offered by research participants, other research methodologies should be utilized. For example, in the current study several parents described the importance of keeping any information shared during the course of the disclosure focused on the child as opposed to sharing information about any relationships the child might currently be in. On the surface, this advice sounds plausible and fitting. However, a search of the literature revealed no research with which to support or refute this

statement. A quantitative study focused on this supposition would allow this piece of well meaning advice to become a sound recommendation, or would show it to be unfounded and therefore unnecessary to factor in to a successful coming out scenario.

A Note on Diversity and Terminology

Pioneering sexuality researcher Alfred Kinsey (1948) believed that sexuality existed on a spectrum, anchored at its extremes by homosexuality and heterosexuality. The abundance of diversity within that spectrum has led to multiple labels for those possessing a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. Common labels for non-heterosexuals in popular and academic literature include: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, queer, homosexual, and questioning (Savin-Williams, 2001). The present study will examine data gathered from parents of children who self-identify as gay or lesbian.

While the decision to limit this investigation to the parents of a small segment of the non-heterosexual continuum may create an artificial boundary around a phenomenon that may prove to be more global, it also provides a much needed focus. Without said focus, potentially significant insights could be lost among the diversity of perspectives that can be found in the non-heterosexual world.

The variety of identities present within the non-heterosexual community also present a challenge related to the terminology used to describe this group. Often individuals who fall within this group are simply referred to as homosexual, or as members of the homosexual community. Although seemingly inclusive, this label excludes those who identify questioning as well as those who simply eschew the more

traditional labels for various non-traditional sexual orientations. This study is focused solely on the parents of those who self-identify as gay or lesbian and thus it would be ideal to describe these children as such throughout the entirety of this work. The frequency with which these children are referenced however makes this a clumsy and distracting prospect. Therefore, there are times when I have chosen to use the general terms “homosexual” or “homosexual community” to refer to the more exclusive identities of gay and lesbian individuals in order to allow the exploration of this dissertation to flow as smoothly as possible.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background Information

To the outside observer, the disclosure of one's sexual orientation must seem like a relatively simple and straightforward process that can be collapsed into three distinct elements; the decision to disclose, the disclosure itself, and everything that is to occur subsequent to the disclosure. This is not the case for the person making the disclosure. Each of these three elements contain within them a multitude of experiences, processes, and sub-processes, all of which help shape and define what is arguably the most pivotal experience in the life of a gay or lesbian individual. The current study will focus on specific aspects of the second element, the disclosure moment. In order to fully understand what occurs during the disclosure of one's sexual orientation, greater insight into the processes that leads up to it is necessary.

Models of Homosexual Identity Development

Although a statement of the obvious, it bears mentioning that the initial step in the coming out process involves first coming out to oneself. Regardless of the etiology of homosexuality, a discussion of which will not be entered into here, the development of a homosexual identity is a process that every gay, lesbian individual undergoes, to a certain extent, at some point in his or her life. Several authors have proposed theoretical models outlining the development of a homosexual identity (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Ponce, 1978; Weinberg, 1978). According to Troiden (1989), these models all share five common elements, the first of which is that homosexual identity formation occurs within

a culture that is characterized by stigma towards homosexual individuals. This stigma allows for the public voicing of negative attitudes towards members of the homosexual community and encourages the suppression of homosexual identities. Stigma governs how one develops as a homosexual as well as how one chooses to express his or her homosexual identity. Homosexual identities develop over long periods of time, and significant periods of growth may be marked by developmental stages (Coleman, 1982). As the homosexual identity develops, one becomes increasingly at ease with the label of “homosexual” as it is applied to the self. The fourth element of homosexual identity development that is generally agreed upon by most researchers is that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals tend to experience an ever-increasing desire to disclose their sexual orientations across a variety of settings and to a variety of audiences. Finally, as time progresses, homosexual individuals increase the frequency and depth of their contact with the homosexual community as a whole (Troiden, 1989).

Troiden (1989) described a four-stage model of homosexual identity development that combined the work of theorists in this area within a sociological context. Troiden’s first stage, titled *sensitization*, occurs prior to puberty and involves a process through which lesbians and gay males acquire social experiences that will allow them to identify the label of “homosexual” as something personally meaningful later in life. During this stage it is not uncommon for the young gay or lesbian to feel different from his or her peers. The second stage in Troiden’s model, *identity confusion*, often takes place during adolescence and signifies the beginnings of the personalization of past thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that could be identified as homosexual. This stage can

be thought of as a sort of limbo. Lesbians and gay males are not prepared to identify themselves as such, and at the same time are unable to fully identify with the heterosexual world. This identity confusion can lead to a period of great turmoil in an adolescent's life and feelings of anxiety, depression, and even thoughts of suicide are not uncommon (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Remafedi, 1987; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991). As adolescence progresses, the idea that one "might" be homosexual begins to take root (Troiden, 1989). For males this tends to occur around the age of 17 (Troiden & Goode, 1980); females at an average age of 18 (Schafer, 1976). By late adolescence or early adulthood, the majority of lesbians and gay males advance to *identity assumption*. The homosexual identity has not only developed fully as a self-identity, but as a presented identity. Other aspects of this stage involve identity acceptance, regular association with other homosexuals, sexual experimentation, and exploration of the homosexual culture (Troiden, 1989). For lesbians and gay males in the *commitment* stage, "it becomes easier, more attractive, less costly to remain homosexual" than to attempt to operate in the heterosexual world (Plummer, 1975, p. 150). The hallmarks of this stage are self-acceptance and an overall comfort with the homosexual identity. Troiden (1989) indicated that there are several internal and external dimensions of commitment, chief among them a perception of the homosexual identity as a valid self-identity, and the disclosure of the homosexual identity to non-homosexual audiences.

The Coming Out Process

Just as a stable homosexual identity forms over time, the process through which a gay, lesbian, or bisexual individual is able to disclose this identity to others has been formulated as a linear progression of stages. The coming out model developed by Carrion and Lock (1997) was one of the first to incorporate both biological and psychological factors into the developmental schema and is often cited as one of the definitive models of the coming out process. The first stage in this process involves the *internal discovery of the sexual orientation*. Individuals at this stage often react to the initial discovery with bewilderment, shame, minimization, and/or denial. Several factors combine to determine how an individual will react at this initial stage, and some of the most significant include access to supportive resources, belief that sexual feelings are inconsequential, and sexual exploration prior to identity integration. *Inner exploration of attraction to the sexual object* involves the beginnings of acceptance of one's sexual orientation. The ease through which an individual transitions through this stage is largely governed by his or her reaction to the discovery of a homosexual orientation. An initial reaction of shame or denial will likely be compounded by the forced confrontation with the sexual orientation that is inherent in this stage. On the other hand, a response of bewilderment or open curiosity leads to an internalization of the exploration process as something personally meaningful. As an individual moves towards congruence between sexual orientation and personal identity, *early acceptance of an integrated sexual self* occurs. To the gay or lesbian individual, this initial acceptance is marked by the experience of the same-sex attraction as a natural phenomenon that is not personally

disturbing. Movement into the fourth stage, *congruence probing*, is marked by an individual's preparedness to test the congruence between sexual orientation and personal identity. One common means of testing this congruence is through sexual behavior, although membership in support groups or the formations of supportive relationships are also normal and appropriate channels for this task (Carrion & Lock, 1997).

The actual task of coming out frequently takes place as one develops a *further acceptance of an integrated sexual self*. For this disclosure to be considered a positive event, an individual must have successfully moved through the previous four stages. Actively sharing one's sexual orientation with significant others and acquaintances allows one to engage in *self-esteem consolidation*. This process allows the individual to resolve potential conflicts that may exist between one's own self-perception and the perceptions that others may have. As an individual develops a sense of pride and acceptance in his or her sexual orientation, the need for validation and acceptance by others decreases and a *mature formation of an integrated self-identity* develops. The development of an *integrated self-identity within a social context* is the final phase of the coming out process. At this point, the individual is able to interact with society as a whole from the unique perspective of a member of the homosexual community. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this final stage is that the individual is now in a position to be able to provide support to others who are engaged in the coming out process (Carrion & Lock, 1997).

The success and speed with which one moves through the final four stages of Carrion and Lock's model is largely dictated by the reactions he or she receives as the

sexual orientation is initially disclosed to significant others, peers, and family members. Positive or neutral disclosure experiences encourage acceptance and integration of the sexual identity and promote overall psychological well-being. Negative experiences, on the other hand, hinder this process and can lead to the development of clinically significant levels of depression, anxiety, and other affective symptomology.

Studies Addressing a Child's Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Parents

While the majority of gay males and lesbians will disclose their sexual orientations to parents at some point in their lives (Cain, 1991; Cramer & Roach, 1988; D'Augelli, 1991; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), very few select a parent as the first person to whom they chose to disclose this information. Less than 10% of sexual minority youth will first choose to disclose their sexual orientations to a parent, and those that do typically choose their mothers (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998). D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) reported that of the 194 sexual minority youths that participated in their study, only 2 disclosed to their fathers before anyone else. Children may not be likely to disclose their sexual orientations to their parents first, but they are choosing to do so at an earlier age. Today's youth are disclosing their attractions to same-sex individuals while still in high-school, and at times middle-school (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Earlier studies report the average age of first disclosure to parents as occurring in the mid-20's or later (Savin Williams, 1990; Savin-Williams, 1998; Schope, 2002).

How does a child arrive at the decision to disclose his or her sexual orientation to a parent? Waldner and Magruder (1999) suggested that a child's decision to disclose was

contingent upon perceived family relations, perceived supportive resources within the community, and the degree to which that child is able to express an identity that falls outside of heterosexual norms. Those authors defined identity expression as the frequency with which youths participate in gay and lesbian supportive organizations and the frequency with which they engage in gay and lesbian sexual behavior. Based on this model it was hypothesized that strongly positive family relationships would discourage a child's perception of gay and lesbian supportive resources within the community as well as discourage that child's homosexual identity expression and homosexual identity disclosure. In addition, the authors hypothesized that a child's perceptions of supportive resources would encourage identity expression and that the more a child expresses his or her identity, the more likely the child will be to disclose his or her sexual orientation to a parent. Waldner and Magruder (1999) based their hypotheses on the principle that a gay or lesbian child would not want to disrupt the status quo of a strongly positive family relationship, and would therefore choose to remain closeted.

To test their model Waldner and Magruder (1999) administered questionnaires to 172 self-identified gay and lesbian youth. The youth were all white and 95% of them came from a suburban, upper East coast community. Results of structural equation modeling indicated support for the authors' hypothesis that the likelihood of a child coming out to his or her parents was influenced by the availability of gay-supportive resources, identity expression, and positive family relationships. More specifically, children who perceive positive family relationships are less likely to be aware of gay-supportive resources within the community and are less likely to violate heterosexual

norms. Perhaps most significantly, the perception of positive family relationships decreased the likelihood that a child would disclose his or her sexual orientation to a parent. While important, this effect was mitigated if the youth perceived the availability of gay-supportive resources and was able to express an identity that was not based on heterosexual norms. In other words, the child was more likely to disclose his or her sexual orientation to a parent if resources existed within the community that could provide support that might be withdrawn by the parent.

Why does a child decide to take the major step of choosing to come out to his or her parents, and to which member of the parental dyad is the child most likely to disclose? Studies have shown a link between a gay male's decision to disclose his sexual orientation and his desire to foster a more trusting and open relationship with a parent, most frequently a mother (Ben-Ari, 1995; Boon & Miller, 1999; Miller & Boon, 2000). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) attempted to answer the questions of who any why a sexual minority youth is likely to disclose his or her sexual orientation to by interviewing 164 gay men and lesbian women between the ages of 17 and 25. In a series of semi-structured interviews, participants were asked questions regarding milestones of sexual identity development, factors that influenced their decision to disclose or not disclose their homosexual identity, and perceived parental reactions. Data-analysis indicated that the most critical factor in determining to whom a child is most likely to disclose his or her sexual orientation was sex of the parent, with gay males and lesbians choosing to disclose their sexual orientations to their mothers before their fathers, or choosing to disclose their sexual orientations to their mothers alone. In choosing to

disclose to their mother, participants of both sexes indicated that this disclosure was motivated by the existence of a close relationship between mother and child. Sons were more likely to disclose to their fathers in an effort to elicit support and in the hopes that they might be able to form closer relationships with their fathers in the future.

Schope (2002) attempted to discern which specific factors are likely to lead to a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation to a parent by surveying 443 gay men. The largest number of participants, 59%, were between the ages of 31 and 49 while approximately 20% were between the ages of 16-30 and 20% were aged 50+. Ninety-one percent of Schope's sample was Caucasian, and 77% possessed college degrees. Participants were questioned regarding various demographic information including current level of religiosity and primary occupation, as well as level of "outness" across a variety of settings. Results showed that living in a rural community decreased the likelihood that an individual would disclose his sexual orientation. In addition, the level of a parent's religiosity decreased the likelihood that a young gay man would come out to his or her parents.

Studies Addressing Parental Reactions to a Child's Disclosure of Sexual Orientation

The discovery that a child who was assumed to be heterosexual is actually homosexual often leads to a brief period of crisis within most families (Myers, 1982, Martin & Hetrick, 1988, Plummer, 1989, Troiden, 1989). Parents are required to re-conceptualize their ideas about their children's identities as well as develop a new identity as the parent of a gay or lesbian child. Embedded in this process is a grief response that is based, in part, on the parent having to let go of the hopes and dreams he

or she had developed for the child's future. While little research has been done to investigate the actual process that parents move through after a child discloses his or her sexual orientation, Strommen (1989) attempted to describe certain stages through which parents progress in the period of time that follows a disclosure.

The process that Strommen (1989) proposed actually begins prior to a child's disclosure with the *subliminal awareness* that a child is homosexual. This awareness is often based on behavior patterns and preconceived notions of stereotypical gender role characteristics. The coming out event itself precipitates a period of *impact* and is often accompanied by feelings of denial, shock, anger, confusion, blame, and/or guilt. As parents begin to cope with their son's or daughter's sexual orientations, a time of *adjustment* to this new family dynamic begins. Typically, these coping efforts are maladaptive, and often consist of a parent's attempts to suppress his or her child's sexual identity from others in order to maintain social, religious and professional respect. Another common coping strategy employed by parents at this stage involves an effort to change their sons or daughters sexual orientation, sometimes through extreme measures.

Strommen (1989) suggests that as time begins to pass and creates distance from the disclosure moment parents often begin actively working through their thoughts and feelings about their children's sexual orientations. This period of *resolution* often involves a parent learning more about homosexuality and its origins, as well as beginning to challenge pre-conceived notions and stereotypes of what it means to be gay. Finally, as parents complete the process of mourning for their children's futures and become more educated about the homosexual condition, the process of *integration*

begins. This integration allows the parent to fully accept his or her child for who they are, exactly as they are.

To begin the process of quantifying parental reactions to the disclosure of a child's sexual orientation, Muller (1987) interviewed 111 families about their post-disclosure relationships. Nearly half of the families, or 48%, characterized the parent child relationship as one of loving denial. This state combines a positive relationship between parent and child with a parent's need to be closeted about his or her child's status as a gay male, lesbian, or bisexual individual to individuals outside of the family unit. A slightly smaller number of families, 36%, experienced a relationship characterized by resentful denial. Parents involved in this type of relationship tend to experience a prolonged difficulty in accepting their children's sexual orientations, while the children of these parents often limit contact out of a need for self-protection. A small segment (11%) of those families who were interviewed described a relationship of loving openness. Not only are parents in this type of relationship accepting of their children's sexual orientation, but they are also openly positive in sharing this information with individuals outside of the family unit. A total of 5% of the families reported a relationship of hostile recognition, which is characterized by a complete inability to accept a child's sexual orientation which often results in total estrangement between parent and child.

A similar study conducted by D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) attempted to determine familial reactions to the disclosure of a child's sexual orientation by sampling 105 members of lesbian, gay and bisexual social or support groups in 14

metropolitan areas. Participants were between the ages of 15 and 21 and approximately two thirds of the sample was white. Half of the youth surveyed reported that their mothers were completely accepting of them after disclosure had occurred, while one quarter of the youth reported that their fathers were accepting. Another one-quarter of fathers were described as “actively rejecting”, as were 10% of mothers (D’Augelli, Hersberger, & Pilkington, 1998).

Weinberg (1972) conceptualized parental reactions to a child’s disclosure of his or her sexual orientation as consisting of two distinct elements. The first element involves a parent assigning negative beliefs and attributions onto the child. This results in a fundamental shift in the parent’s view of the child, who is now seen as “a member of another species, someone whose essential wants are unrecognizable and different” (Weinberg, 1972, p. 97). As a result of this first process, parents tend to experience strong feelings of responsibility for their children’s conditions. Feeling responsible for a child’s status as a homosexual individual often leads a parent into a period of crisis and may create a temporary need for emotional distance from the child.

Several authors have discussed typical concerns that parents face after a child discloses his or her sexual orientation (Borhek, 1983; Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986; Robinson, Skeen, & Walters, 1987; Muller, 1987; Strommen, 1989). Concerns that the child will be unhappy and lonely are often cited by parents, as are fears that the child will contract a sexually transmitted disease, face harassment, lose religious beliefs, and never have children of his or her own. Parents also experience a number of concerns related to their own well-being. These typically include having no grandchildren, feeling

alienated from other family members, feeling like a failure as a parent, integrating moral/religious values with the love for a child, and integrating a child's same-sex partner into the family unit.

In one of the first studies to utilize a sample of the parents of gay and lesbian youth, Ben-Ari (1995) interviewed twenty-seven parents to determine how parents respond to the news that their sons or daughters are gay. The most common reactions experienced by the parents, in order from most to least common, were shock, followed by shame and guilt (which were experienced with equal frequency), acknowledgement, acceptance, denial, anger, and rejection. Interestingly, parent's feelings of shock, guilt, shame, denial, anger, and rejection were mitigated by pre-disclosure levels of awareness of homosexuality. In other words, parents who had nothing in their backgrounds related to homosexuality were more likely to respond negatively to their children's disclosures, while those who had some awareness of homosexuality or had past interactions with homosexual individuals were more likely to respond positively to the disclosures.

Another study that utilized a direct sampling of parents also set out to learn how parents respond upon learning that their child is a homosexual (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). A sample of 402 parents from different regions of the United States was gathered from two national organizations that provide support for parents and their children wherever it is needed. This sample was predominantly white (97%), educated (73% with an education beyond high school), and liberal (78% either "very" or "somewhat" liberal). Upon learning that their children were gay, the majority of parents indicated that they experienced five stages of mourning that mirrored those originally

outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969) when one faces one's own mortality; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. As was the case with the Kubler-Ross model the authors found that parents did not move through their stages in a set order. Parents could skip stages, become stuck at certain stages, and re-experience other stages. The progression offered by Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) consists of shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance. Feelings of guilt tended to center around concerns that the parent was somehow responsible for the child's sexual orientation, either due to some genetic component or through faulty child-rearing practices. Anger was not necessarily manifested directly at the child for being gay, but was more often a reflection of the parent's perceptions that the child had previously been unable to trust the parent with this information. As one parent succinctly stated, "I was angry that my child did not trust enough to tell me" (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989, p. 67). The authors were pleased to note that within two-years of first learning that their children were gay or lesbian, 97% of the participants reported that they had successfully worked through the grief process and negative affect and had been able to accept their children's sexual orientations as an integral part of their identities (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989).

In an ideal world, all parents would meet the news that their children are gay with acceptance or, at the very least, neutral ambivalence. The unfortunate truth of the situation is that this is not an ideal world, and parents all too often respond negatively to their children's disclosures. Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) interviewed a sample of 194 gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals between the ages of 15 and 21 in order to ascertain the frequency with which these youth were victimized across a variety of

settings, including home, school, and within the community. Within this sample, approximately 36% of the youth reported at least one incident of having been verbally insulted by an immediate family member, while 22% of females and 14% of males reported having been verbally threatened. Of those who were polled, 10% percent, nearly one in ten, reported experiencing physical assault at the hands of an immediate family member. When asked to identify their perpetrators, 6% of the overall sample identified their mother while 3% identified their father.

To ascertain the incidence of anti-gay violence amongst ethnic minority members of the gay and lesbian community, Hunter, (1990) recruited a sample of 500 gay and lesbian youths (mean age = 17.1) that was 42% Black and 40% Latino. Of that sample, 201 participants, or 40% of those who were surveyed, reported experiencing at least one violent physical attack based on sexual orientation. Not only does ethnic minority status increase the likelihood of a gay or lesbian child experiencing physical assault, it also increases the likelihood of this assault being perpetrated by an immediate family member. Of those youth who reported experiencing physical assault based on sexual minority status, that assault was perpetrated by a member of the immediate family 61% of the time.

In conclusion, research on the disclosure of sexual orientation to parents has tended to focus either on children's perceptions of their parents' reactions, or on parents' thoughts and feelings immediately after the disclosure has taken place. Further exploration of why parents respond the way they do after a disclosure is made is required to gain a clearer understanding of the coming out process in its entirety. The majority of

the prior research in this area has been quantitative in nature, and exploratory research in this area may allow for the development of theories of the disclosure of sexual orientation to parents that are data based. While some anecdotal literature does exist that offers suggestions for a disclosure that is experienced as satisfying by parents, the degree to which these suggestions are based on personal observations versus controlled scientific inquiries is unknown. Therefore, what little research that does exist in this area can not be taken as trustworthy or reliable. Qualitative inquiries like the current study have the potential to uncover new characteristics and interactions within the construct of disclosure of sexual orientation while at the same time adding to the current knowledge base. The study presented here endeavors to utilize the experience and expertise of those who have been on the receiving end of a disclosure, in order to provide helpful information to those who still must face this important and intimidating task. The current study appears to be the first to directly question parents about those factors in a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation either impeded or facilitated the parent's ability to accept and/or begin adapting to this news. The use of a qualitative research methodology and its associated checks for the trustworthiness of the data will allow the findings of the current study to be practically applied to future coming out scenarios.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The current study is a qualitative investigation of the experiences of the parents of gay men and lesbian women. The sample consisted of the parents of children who self-identify as gay or lesbian and who have shared this identification with the parents in question. Data were gathered by the author of this study through the use of one-one-one retrospective interviews. Audio recordings of the interviews were obtained, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed using qualitative techniques to search for patterns and themes, as well as to aid in the development of interpretations.

Participants

The study participants were 11 parents of self-identified gay men and lesbian women. Inclusion criteria included: (a) the parent having learned of the child's sexual orientation, either directly or indirectly, from the child, and (b) any parent not involved in the interview process that is actively involved in the child's life was required to be aware of the child's self-identification as gay or lesbian. In order to describe the participants demographically, a quantitative measure (Appendix A) was used to assess variables that included gender, current age of parent and child, age of parent and child at disclosure, marital status, ethnicity, level of education, and religiosity.

Sample Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the participants are displayed in Table 1. The order of the participants in the table reflects the order in which they were interviewed.

Demographic categories were provided in multiple-choice format (see Appendix A). The sample consisted of eight women and three men. One woman was the mother of two homosexual children and was interviewed separately regarding her disclosure experience with each child. Because of this, the collected demographic and interview data reflects a sample of 12 parents as opposed to 11. The ordered distribution of ages of the participants is 45, 47, 52, 53, 54, 56, 56, 56, 56, 60, 61, and 66 years. The mean age was 55-years-old.

All of the participants identified their ethnicity as “Caucasian/White.” Ten participants identified their current marital status as “Married/Partnered” while one female identified her marital status as “Widowed.” Ten participants described their religious affiliation as “Protestant” and two described themselves as “Not Religious.” Eight participants attained a bachelor’s degrees, while one participant achieved a master’s degree or higher. Two participants received their high-school diplomas. Nine of the participants lived in Texas at the time of the interview and two lived in Oregon.

The ages at which the participants learned of their children’s sexual orientations are listed in Table 2. For ease of reference participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed for this project. Ages at which participants first learned of their children’s sexual orientations ranged from 43- to 55-years-old, with a mean age of 49. Ages of the participant’s children when they first disclosed their sexual orientations ranged from 14- to 22-years-old, with a mean age of 18.5.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Characteristics

	Grace	Steven	Diana	Greg	Carol	Judy	Tom	Sarah	Holly	Linda	Karen
Gender/ Age	Female 60	Male 61	Female 52	Male 54	Female 66	Female 56	Male 53	Female 56	Female 45	Female 47	Female 56
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Marital Status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Widowed	Married
Religious Affiliation	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant	Not Religiously Affiliated	Not Religiously Affiliated	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant	Protestant
Education Level	B.A. Or B.S.	B.A. Or B.S.	B.A. or B.S.	M.A. or M.S.	1.5 Years of College	B.A. or B.S.	B.A. or B.S.	High School Diploma	B.A. or B.S.	B.A. or B.S.	B.A. or B.S.
Child/ Age	Brian 33	Brian 33	Scott 22	Scott 22	Phil 33	Mia 14	Mia 14	Brent/Ashley 31/24	Gwen 21	Kathy 22	Nicole 24

Table 2: Ages at Disclosure

	Parent		Child	
	Age at Interview	Age at Disclosure	Age at Interview	Age at Disclosure
Grace/Brian	60	47	33	22
Steven/Brian	61	48	33	22
Diana/Scott	52	49	22	19
Greg/Scott	54	51	23	19
Carol/Phil	66	52	33	19
Judy/Mia	56	55	14	14
Tom/Mia	53	53	14	14
Sarah/Brent	56	45	31	20
Sarah/Ashley	56	50	24	18
Holly/Gwen	45	44	21	20
Linda/Kathy	47	43	22	18
Karen/Nicole	56	53	24	21

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using the technique of snowball sampling, in which initial respondents identify and contact individuals who they believe might be willing to participate. In the case of this project, gay and lesbian individuals were solicited at various support meetings for homosexual individuals on the campus of Texas A&M University. Those who believed that their parents would be willing to participate were provided a flyer which detailed the study to provide to the parent in question. This flyer can be found in Appendix B. Interested parents contacted the author via telephone or e-mail, which allowed them to volunteer for the study without the risk of being identified without their consent. Respondents were told that participation in the study would involve an interview of approximately one hour. After verifying that the respondent met

the required inclusion criteria, a packet containing the informational flyer and informed consent document (see Appendix C) was sent. If the respondent was still interested in acting as a research participant after reviewing the flyer and informed consent document, an appointment was arranged for the interview. Those participants who indicated that they would like feedback regarding the results of the current study will receive a summary of the findings following the successful defense of the dissertation.

In order to maximize range and to evaluate the affects of gender and ethnicity on parental satisfaction with the coming out process, the initial plan was that half of the parents included in the sample would be male and half of the parents would be female, and that parents from ethnic minority backgrounds would be actively sought as well. Only three men responded to the request for participants, which I believe reflects the common trend that the mothers of gay and lesbian children are more likely to participate in research activities than are the fathers of gay and lesbian children. In addition, all attempts to recruit participants from ethnic minority backgrounds were unsuccessful, which may be indicative of the general taboo that exists in many cultures regarding the discussion of a family member's sexual orientation with outsiders.

Procedure

The interview setting was selected by each research participant. Four interviews were conducted at the home of the interviewee, six were conducted from the interviewer's home via telephone, and one was conducted from the interviewer's office via telephone.

At the beginning of each interview I explained the purpose of the study, reviewed the contents of the consent form with the participant, and asked if there were any questions about it or the study in general. I then explained that transcripts of the interview would be made following the interview, and that pseudonyms would replace the real names of the participants and their children throughout the transcripts and the study itself. I also reinforced the interviewee's right to refuse to answer any question that might feel uncomfortable, as well as the right to request that a segment of the interview not be included in the transcript. Once the interviewee expressed an understanding of his or her rights as outlined by the consent form I would state that I was preparing to activate the audio recording device, and would then switch on the machine. Interviews that were conducted in person were recorded by a miniature tape-recorder placed between me and the interviewee. Interviews that were conducted via telephone were recorded using a Radio Shack Mini Recorder Control.

Once the interviews were completed, I explained that I would contact the interviewee if I needed to clarify a particular response given during the interview. I also offered each interviewee the opportunity to contact me via telephone or e-mail if he or she had additional information that would benefit my understanding of the participant's experience. No participants contacted me after the interviews to add information.

All audio tapes and transcriptions were coded with the participants' pseudonyms. No identifying information was used to label the audio tapes or the transcripts. Audio tapes and consent forms were stored in a locked file-cabinet in a private office on the

campus of Texas A&M University. Transcripts were stored in a locked file cabinet in the home of the primary investigator.

Interview Protocol

To ensure that the central questions were asked of each participant, an interview protocol was developed for use throughout the duration of the study. Rather than conducting the interviews in a strict question and answer format, a conversational exploration of the relevant areas was conducted, and the participants were encouraged to share their stories with as much detail as was possible. Questions were presented in a standard manner, and follow-up questions were used to obtain more detailed responses to the general questions when the original responses lacked sufficient detail or did not cover a specific area. At the start of each interview, the purpose of the study as well as the contents of the informed consent document were reviewed. The research participant was then allowed to ask questions of me regarding my background or the background of the study. I would then suggest that the participant begin by describing his or her relationship with the child in question, prior to learning that the child was either gay or lesbian. After all of the central questions had been asked, the interviewee had the opportunity to add any relevant information that he or she believed had been omitted, or to discuss anything about the interview process that felt unfinished.

The central questions and follow-up areas that made up the interview protocol included:

- 1) Prior to the disclosure, what was your relationship with _____ like?

Follow-up areas: Emotional connectedness, relationships with others, discipline problems, familial roles.

2) Did you ever suspect that _____ was _____ before he/she told you?

Follow-up areas: Rationale for suspicion or non-suspicion, expectations for child based on perceived sexual orientation, concerns related to suspicion, impact of suspicion on relationship and subsequent disclosure.

3) What was happening just before _____ came out to you?

Follow-up areas: Emotional/psychological/cognitive state, physical activities, perception that significant information was about to be disclosed .

4) How did _____ come out to you?

Follow-up areas: Content of disclosure, location of disclosure, perception of child's preparedness for disclosure .

5) What happened immediately after _____ came out to you?

Follow-up areas: Physical activities, immediate response to child, child's immediate response to parent.

6) At the moment _____ came out, what do you remember thinking? Feeling?

Follow-up areas: Emotional/psychological/physical state, concerns related to disclosure .

7) What's your most vivid memory from that time?

Follow-up areas: Salient thoughts, images, sounds, or phrases.

8) Overall, how did you feel about the way that _____ came out to you?

Follow-up areas: General satisfaction with the disclosure, general satisfaction with the parent's response .

9) When _____ came out, what are some things that made the news easier to hear?

What are some things that made the news harder to hear?

Follow-up areas: Specific wording used by the child, location of the disclosure, presence or absence of the parent's significant other, child's preparedness for the disclosure, child's emotional/ psychological state during the disclosure .

10) If you could have created the most ideal scenario in which _____ came out to you, how would it have gone?

Follow-up areas: Pre-cursor to the disclosure, content of the disclosure statement, location of the disclosure, presence or absence of significant other, additional information presented by the child .

11) If there was a gay or lesbian child that came to you as the parent of a gay or lesbian child asking for advice on how he or she should come out to his or her parents, what advice would you give that child? What would you tell that child to avoid?

Follow-up areas: Wording/content of the disclosure, location of the disclosure, insight into the parental mind-set, topics/content to avoid.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual retrospective interviews there were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. Participants were given the option of being interviewed either in person or via telephone. Four of the interviews were conducted at the home of the interviewee, and seven were conducted via telephone. The use of qualitative interviews in a research design allows one to integrate multiple perspectives, develop detailed and holistic descriptions, bridge intersubjectivities for elucidating a new

area of research, and to give a voice to the experiences of participants (Weiss, 1994). Given that any empathy present in the exchange between researcher and participant provides an additional outlet of information that leads to a greater understanding of the purpose and significance that people ascribe to their actions, interviews provide the opportunity to gain a more informed awareness of the thoughts and feelings of research participants (Stiles, 1993). The interview strategy used in this study was guided by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Weiss (1994). Both of these sources provide a theoretical framework for the grounding of a qualitative study, as well as structured guidelines for the implementation of qualitative interviews.

As with any type of research methodology, qualitative studies possess inherent strengths and weaknesses. Marshall and Rossman (1999) indicate that qualitative interviews allow for the collection of rich, in-depth data, which allows for a more meaningful understanding of the significance that people place on the events that shape their lives. Another strength of the retrospective interview is the opportunity for the further probing and clarifying of responses of interest, an option which is lost in studies that utilize survey administration.

The main weaknesses of this design include the typical problems that arise when one recounts a subjective experience, the reliance upon the full cooperation and honesty of participants, the risk of posing questions in such a way that evokes brief or non-narrative responses, and the lack of subjective opinions on which to base definitive conclusions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Data Analysis

The primary components of data analysis consisted of transcribing audio-tapes of the interviews into Microsoft Word document files, coding and organizing data according to concepts and themes, creating interview excerpts organized by relevance to research question areas, and analyzing patterns and themes between and within participants. Each interview was transcribed in its entirety by the primary investigator. The number of pages for the transcribed interviews ranged from 4 to 12 double-spaced pages, with the average being 8.4 pages. Approximately 94% of interview content was on topic, or was relevant to the project's research questions.

Data analysis was conducted utilizing the sixth version of the software program called NUD*IST (N6). N6 is a qualitative data analysis software program that provides tools for organization, coding, and examination of qualitative data. Each interview transcript was uploaded into the N6 software upon its completion. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted the benefits of utilizing computers to aid in processing the large quantities of data that result from a qualitative investigation. The abilities of a computer to assist in the mechanical aspects of data analysis not only provide new and intuitive methods to process and display information, but also provide the qualitative researcher with the most valuable resource of all, time. The time saved painstakingly transferring data units from transcript to note-card and in hastily scribbling notes during the coding process can now be put to more effective use in the interpretive phase of data analysis.

The method of qualitative analysis used in the present study is the constant comparative analysis. The constant comparative method was first developed by Glaser

and Strauss (1967) as a means to predict and explain behavior by developing a grounding theory. Lincoln and Guba (1985) later refined and operationalized the constant comparative method to allow for a more seamless integration with the principles of the naturalistic inquiry. The five main components of the constant comparative method involve: a) unitizing, b) categorizing, c) integrating categories and their properties, d) delimiting the theory, and e) writing the theory.

Unitizing involves the process of dissecting data, here the information contained within each individual participant interview, into separate units. Units can vary in size and range from a few key words in a sentence to an entire paragraph. As defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit must possess two essential characteristics, regardless of size. First, each piece of information must be heuristic in nature. In other words, each unit must focus on some understanding that the researcher needs or some action that the researcher needs to take. Second, each unit must consist of the smallest piece of information that is able to stand alone. In order to meet these criteria the unit in question is required to be understood without the aid of any extraneous information other than, “a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 345). In a traditional constant comparative analysis, each unit is written on the front of a note-card, with relevant information about the unit, such as the original location of the unit, written on the back. In the current study, each unit was entered into the N6 database and, in so doing, was directly and automatically linked to all relevant information pertaining to interviewee and unit location.

The end of the unitizing process signals the beginning of the process of categorizing the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described this process as the bringing together of units that appear to contain the same general content under a single, unifying category. The end result of this process is a set of rules that, when properly adhered to, will justify the inclusion of units into, or exclusion of units out of, a particular category. These rules also allow for tests of replicability once the process has been completed, and can serve as a measure of internal consistency within each category. Units are assigned to a category on the basis of the “look likeness” or “feel likeness” of each unit, a procedure described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as determining whether the contents of one unit are essentially the same as the contents of the units that form a particular category.

The categorizing process begins with the examination of the first unit, which is assigned to a preliminary category. A second unit is then examined and compared with the first unit based on the principles described above. If this unit is found to contain similar properties to the first unit, it is placed in that category. If not, the unit is assigned to its own category. This process is carried out with each unit until no unit remains uncategorized. Those units that do not appear to match the contents of any of the categories are placed in a separate miscellaneous category for future comparisons. Once a category accumulates between six and eight units, the categorizing process is temporarily halted and an effort is made to determine the properties that form the nucleus of that category. These properties are used to develop an inclusion rule which future units must meet for assignment to said category. At this point all future units are

assigned to the category in question based on its inclusion rule as opposed to the properties of “look alike” and “feel alike.” As the comparison process continues, all units are continuously examined to determine appropriateness of fit within each category. Units can be reassigned to the miscellaneous category based on the development of an inclusion rule, or they may be used to develop a subcategory. Inclusion rules themselves can be revised at any point based on the information contained within a category’s units.

Once each unit has been examined and assigned to the appropriate category, the process of integrating categories and their properties begins. The first priority at this stage is given to those units in the miscellaneous category. An effort is made to assign these units to already established categories. Some of the miscellaneous units may be deemed irrelevant and are subsequently deleted from the database. Others may simply remain uncategorizable and should remain isolated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that no more than five to seven percent of the total number of units should be uncategorizable. Once this has been accomplished, the amount of overlap between categories should be determined. Should significant overlap exist, category assignment rules should be reevaluated and potentially revised. When fully executed, this process provides the researcher with the confidence that categories are both stable and meaningful.

Delimiting the theory occurs as a somewhat parallel process to that of integrating categories and their properties. As the amount of data that is processed increases, fewer and fewer modifications to categories and their organizing rules will be necessary, due in

large part to improvements in the articulation and integration of categories. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) categories at this stage should be well defined with clear rules for inclusion, and saturated to the point that no new information is required to exemplify them. Once the categories are “internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.349) the researcher can go about the business of writing the theory. In the current study, this stage will be executed in the Results and Discussion sections.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Qualitative investigations are often described as undisciplined and consisting solely of subjective observations and indiscriminant attention to only the most obvious of details. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness in qualitative research results can be established through the use of four standardized criteria: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. These constructs are roughly analogous to those used in quantitative research to establish the trustworthiness of a study: internal validity; external validity; reliability; and objectivity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that credibility, which they also refer to as truth value, has been reached when “the reconstructions that have been arrived at via the inquiry are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities” (p. 296). In other words, the information obtained over the course of a naturalistic inquiry (in this case the content of an interview) must represent an accurate portrayal of the experiences of those who participated in the inquiry, as determined by the participants themselves. Lincoln and Guba advocate the use of member checks as a means of ensuring the

credibility of a study. Member checking is both a formal and an informal process and should occur throughout the duration of an inquiry. An informal member check occurs during the course of each individual interview through the use of clarifying questions, reflections, and interpretations. At the end of each interview the interviewee is provided the opportunity to share any additional information that he or she might determine is important in allowing the investigator access to his or her own unique subjective experience.

A formal member check occurs when the investigator seeks the input of a knowledgeable individual who is representative of the source group for participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the case of the current study, a formal member check was conducted with the able assistance of Mr. Edward Martel, a current member and former chapter president of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the father of a gay son. Based on his experiences in both of these roles he is familiar with the various settings and contexts in which children disclose their sexual orientations to parents. The formal member check conducted by Mr. Martel included reviewing the de-identified parent interviews along with the associated categories and themes, providing suggestions related to these themes, and confirming the accuracy of the findings.

Whereas quantitative studies are concerned with external validity, or the degree to which results can be attributed to groups outside of the original sample, qualitative studies focus on the concept of transferability, or applicability. This principle infers that if the context of the study is similar to the context of another situation, the interpretations derived from the results of the study may be transferable to this other situation. Lincoln

and Guba (1985) state that transferability can be achieved through the use of a thick description. A thick description generally consists of two distinct components; the first being a detailed account of the context and setting of an inquiry. Secondly, a detailed account of the process as it relates to the study observed in that context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on the thick description, an individual interested in transferring the results of the study onto another context should have enough information to determine whether or not the transfer is warranted. In the case of the current study, the thick description consists of the description of the participants and the interview protocol, as well as by the discussion of the interview process itself.

Dependability, or consistency of information, is the quantitative parallel of reliability. Dependability speaks to the need of a study to be as free from inconsistency in instrumentation as possible. Given that naturalistic inquiry makes use of the investigator as instrument and that the very nature of a naturalistic inquiry is emergent and ever changing, some level of inconsistency is inherent. The task becomes how best to minimize the amount and influence of inconsistency contained within a study, and to ensure some measure of dependability is present. The method put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to bring dependability to a study is that of an audit trail. As originally outlined by Halpern (1983), the audit trail consists of materials that are contained within six categories: (a) raw data, (b) data reduction and analysis products, (c) data reconstruction and synthesis products, (d) process notes, (e) materials relating to intentions and dispositions, (f) and instrument development information. These materials allow one to trace the evolution of a study and provide the foundation of dependability.

Common methods of establishing an audit trail include the use of electronically recorded materials, field notes, summaries of events and behaviors, theoretical notes, categorical structures, methodological notes, and personal notes. For example, in the present study I took notes after each interview which aided me in making any necessary and relevant changes to subsequent interviews.

Lastly, the confirmability, or neutrality, of a naturalistic inquiry is ensured when it can be determined that the biases of the investigator did not unduly influence the data. As was the case with dependability, confirmability is established through the use of a clear audit trail. In addition, the audit process is an integral part of verifying the confirmability of a study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The audit process as described by Lincoln and Guba, and adapted from Halpern (1983), consists of five stages (a) pre-entry, (b) determination of audibility, (c) formal agreement (d) determination of trustworthiness, (e) and closure.

In the pre-entry stage, involves the researcher selecting an auditor and describing the study, the method of data collection, and the process of data analysis. This auditor should be a colleague with an equal distribution of power to that of the investigator (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Determination of audibility involves the presentation of relevant materials from the audit trail to the auditor for the purpose of establishing familiarity with the study and its data. In the case of the current study, the auditor was provided with a copy of the Methodology section of this paper along with the Appendices, and the research questions. Copies of each transcript were also given to the auditor. The formal agreement stage involves an agreement in writing that commits the

auditor to the project. Halpern (1983) suggested that this agreement outline the time limit for the audit process, the goals of the audit, the roles respective to the auditor and the researcher, the logistics regarding meeting times and places, the product outcomes, and the format for the written report of the auditor, also known as the letter of attestation (see Appendix D). The fourth stage, determination of trustworthiness, involves the assessment of credibility, dependability, and confirmability through a review of the transcripts and a comparison between the findings of the auditor and the researcher. The final stage of the audit process, closure, involves the investigator and the auditor discussing the audit process and noting any relevant feedback. It is at this stage that the auditor provides the letter of attestation to the investigator (Appendix D).

How the Data Analysis Unfolded

The process by which the data for the present study were analyzed closely matches the process outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The level of unitization deemed necessary for the current study was that of individual sentences. Units of a smaller size would have separated key pieces of information that would have reduced the likelihood of fully capturing each participant's unique experience and perspective. Units of a larger size would have risked the loss of significant and relevant insights and perspectives in the complex richness of the data.

The categorization process was conducted according to the recommendations set by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Units were sorted according to the "look alike" and "feel alike" criteria outlined earlier. When a category accumulated between six and eight units of data, a category definition was assigned and all subsequent units were placed within

the category based on their fit with said definition, as opposed to “look alike” and “feel alike” criteria. This process continued until all units were either assigned to a category or placed in a data file for miscellaneous units. Once the initial categorization process was completed, two more cycles of categorization were carried out. First, each unit in a category was compared with that category’s rule for inclusion and then against the rules of inclusion for all of the other categories. After this second cycle of categorization was completed, this process was followed a third and final time. This level of redundancy in analysis ensures the internal homogeneity as well as the external heterogeneity of categories.

The last step of the analysis consisted of the external audit for trustworthiness. After reviewing category definitions and the units contained within each category, the auditor determined that there was a goodness of fit for approximately 95% of the data. Based on the feedback provided by the auditor, units were either added to or removed from their respective categories as needed. Before this occurred, the auditor and investigator discussed the rationale for making such changes and made a unanimous decision as to the disposition of each unit in question.

Audit of the Analysis

The auditing recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed to complete the audit of the analysis for the current study. In all, approximately 95% of the data was audited to establish trustworthiness. At the end of the process the auditor concluded that the analysis and results met the requirements of the audit and so certified

the results in a formal letter of attestation (see Appendix D for a copy of this letter).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Analysis of the interviews is organized according to the five areas of inquiry for the current study: a) Influence of a parent's pre-disclosure relationship with a child on his or her reaction to the disclosure or satisfaction with the disclosure, b) the aspects of a child's disclosure that made the news easier or more acceptable to hear, c) the aspects of a child's disclosure that made the news difficult or more unacceptable to hear, d) changes in a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of sexual orientation over time, e) the "ideal" scenario in which a parent would prefer to have his or her child's sexual orientation disclosed. In addition, information pertaining to an additional research-related area of interest is also discussed in this chapter.

Presentation of the Results

Results for the current study will be presented in the following manner:

1. Statement of the Research Question.
2. The inclusion rule for the category to which subsequent data units belong.

For inclusion in a specific category a unit was required to meet the criteria outlined by that category's inclusion rule. Verification of this condition was achieved during the audit process as outlined in Chapter III. For each inclusion rule listed, the associated Appendix letter and page number for the related category immediately follow for ease of reference in locating the entire set of data for that category (e.g. Appendix P, 149).

3. Specific examples of data units from that category.

4. A summary of the various themes contained within categories for each Research Question. These themes are discussed in a general manner and will serve as the foundation for a more detailed exploration of the data in Chapter V.

Research Question 1

How does a parent's pre-disclosure relationship with a child influence his/her reaction to the disclosure/satisfaction with the disclosure?

Categories and Examples

1. The parent discusses the specific nature of the parent/child relationship (Appendix L, 119).

Sarah:

Well we've always been close. I think I always felt that he and I were closer than he and his father were.

Steven:

It was probably not what I had anticipated as a father, in terms of a father/son relationship, but that was not a problem either.

2. The parent describes specific qualities or behaviors associated with the child (Appendix L, 121).

Diana:

I should have known something was wrong I guess, because he wasn't, we didn't go through the typical problems with teenagers and boys, being rude to their mothers, you know.

Holly:

She was a very happy well-adjusted kid. Never was in trouble at school or angry about anything. A kid you can be very proud of.

3. The parent states whether or not he or she perceived a child to be gay or lesbian prior to the disclosure (Appendix L, 123).

Grace:

I didn't but Steven did...I remember the day he said to me, and again Brian was a Jr. in high school, "I would not be surprised if Brian's not gay."

Greg:

He, I remember lying in bed some nights and wondering, "I just wonder if he's gay?"

4. The parent discusses the impact that the early perception of a child's sexuality or lack thereof had on his or her reaction to the actual disclosure (Appendix L, 125).

Grace:

I still didn't expect it, but I think that because of that it wasn't just a total surprise.

Sarah:

And when he told me I wasn't surprised.

5. The parent discloses reasons why he or she never considered that a child was gay or lesbian (Appendix L, 125).

Diana:

So why would I suspect...and he's so serious and so focused on his career and going to med-school and all this that he's totally...and I just figured he's so mature that it is disgusting, and he doesn't want to get involved with anybody too soon.

Karen:

She did the usual things a girl does.

6. The parent mentions reasons why a child was perceived to be gay or lesbian (Appendix L, 127).

Greg:

He had one particular girl-friend who he was always close to, but you never sensed that it was really that hot or anything. So I guess it did cross my mind a couple of times.

Linda:

There were all of these beautiful boys who were after her and she had no interest in them. I went "Why isn't she going out with that one. He's so cute."

Summary of Results for Research Question 1

Descriptions of the children in this study were overwhelmingly positive, as were the descriptions of the parent/child relationships as characterized by the parents. This positive perspective did not appear to be limited to the parent's most recent attitudes about the child but seemed to encompass the entire duration of the child's life. What's more, any negative attributions applied to a child or a relationship, of where there were strikingly few, were quickly minimized or reframed in a positive light.

Eight parents, or 67% of the sample indicated that they had some early awareness that a child might be either gay or lesbian prior to the child's disclosure of this information. All but one of the parents who reported this early awareness indicated that the subsequent disclosure was less of a shock and therefore somewhat easier to hear. The one parent who had an early awareness and had a harder time hearing the news, as well as the parent who had no early awareness, both reported that their children's socially normative gender appropriate behavior prevented them from perceiving that they might have been homosexual. In fact, all of the parents based their early awareness or lack thereof, on traditional gender-role stereotypes and stereotypes of sexuality.

Overall it would appear that a positive view of the child in question, or the perception of a positive parent/child relationship, serves as a mediator in determining how a parent reacts to the news that a child is gay or lesbian, and how satisfied the parent is with the way in which such news is delivered. In addition, any pre-disclosure awareness of a child's sexual orientation seems to increase a parent's ability to hear this kind of information in a more acceptable way.

Research Question 2

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news easier to hear or made the news more acceptable?

Categories and Examples

1. The parent discusses any indicators that important information was about to be shared (Appendix M, 131).

Steven:

He would always fix dinner or he would do something, but his selection of that time, that place, that moment, I didn't frankly have a clue that that was going to happen. There was nothing really leading up to that, at least that I was aware of.

Greg:

Yeah, and his body language and the way he sort of just blurted it out, he was nervous. That wasn't a normal request, like he wrecked the car or something. There was definitely something on his mind...I remember I had a sense of foreboding. And I remember it did cross my mind. "I wonder if he's going to say that he's gay."

2. The parent describes any element of the disclosure that may have made the news easier to hear (Appendix M, 133).

Grace:

And I guess that's why I was so comfortable in a way with Brian telling us at that point in time, because again I know he struggled with it. I know he tried to either make certain or whatever. And after, and again, I've seen him develop and I've seen him...he's bright and articulate and all of those things and I knew it was okay. I felt comfortable that he knew. And if he knew then I in turn had to be able to accept that.

Karen:

I think a real strong positive was that she was very open. I had a lot of questions. She answered them. If there wasn't an answer she knew she offered to get back to me and she did.

3. The parent discusses the child's decision to share the news with one vs. two parents (Appendix M, 135).

Diana:

But I think that, once again it was out of respect and I think he knew that he needed to do it that way. I think it was better to tell us both.

Greg:

It would have been a lot harder for me if he would have told me one on one.

4. The parent discusses any previous encounters with gay or lesbian individuals

(Appendix M, 137).

Judy:

But then my husband and I coming up to Oregon, it was actually the first time I really got involved with gay women. And I just got more and more involved. And I led a group, and a person I became friends with, she was gay, I was straight, and we called it the lesbian/non-lesbian group.

Karen:

But I grew in the San Francisco Bay area near Berkley and am used to seeing a lot of gay people, so was probably much more receptive than my husband, and my whole family in California was also very receptive and I think it's because of where I was born and raised and lived as a kid.

Summary of Results for Research Question 2

Four of the parents in the study reported that they had been aware that some significant piece of information was about to be shared with them prior to the actual disclosure. These parents indicated that they were grateful for this awareness as it gave them time to prepare themselves for whatever this information was going to be. Three parents indicated that they had no awareness of the impending disclosure and attributed this to a lack of cues or atypical behaviors on the part of their children. Everything about the way that the child chose to share this information was in keeping with typical patterns of parent/child interactions. Therefore, the parent had no reason to suspect that anything out of the ordinary was about to occur.

The most commonly mentioned aspects of a child's disclosure that made the news easier or more acceptable to hear included the perception that the child had given this issue significant consideration before disclosing to the parent, an awareness of the child's sensitivity to the parent's experience, the child being open to answering questions, being told in a safe location, and the child providing information regarding gay and lesbian issues and concerns at the time of the disclosure. Seven parents discussed their feelings about the disclosure occurring in the presence or absence of their spouses. Although these parents expressed strong preferences as to whether or not they would prefer to hear the disclosure in the presence or absence of their partners, there was no agreement between the parents as to which scenario would be more satisfying or effective. This seemed to be the one factor that was unique to each parent and family. Lastly, those parents who had had exposure to the homosexual community, or information about the homosexual community prior to the disclosure, seemed to believe that this made their children's disclosures easier to hear.

Research Question 3

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news more difficult to hear or made the news more unacceptable?

Categories and Examples

1. Parent discusses concerns for a child's wellbeing based on his or her sexuality (Appendix N, 140).

Steven:

And all I could think was, "And my God, the last group of people in our society that's going to receive the brunt of our need as a species to hate or look down on

someone is probably going to be the gays and lesbians and I sure wish I could take that burden off of him.” But you can’t.

Carol:

Because you always hear about bad things happening to gay young men, and I was always terrified of something happening to him...And not of the AIDS type things, but more being assaulted or something.

2. The parent discusses any element of the disclosure that may have made the news harder to hear (Appendix N, 142).

Diana:

I don’t think he said anything that made it harder. I think it was just hard to swallow, because we just had big hopes for an easier, normal situation. I mean easier, the traditional situation.

Sarah:

Hearing it over the phone. And she was upset because of what I was thinking. And I was upset by that, but I was more upset by what she said. No, that’s not a recommended method.

3. The parent discusses concerns regarding any impact parenting might have had on the child's sexual orientation (Appendix N, 143).

Grace:

Because I think, I don’t know, and I don’t believe this now at all, but it’s sort of that thing about “Did I, was the way I raised Brian, did I keep him too clean when he was little, did I not let him get dirty, did I not let him play roughhouse or whatever.” Was there something in his childhood upbringing that affected or....you just don’t know.

Greg:

I remember talking to Diana that night, and it still crosses my mind to this day, that if I had been a more quote unquote father to him, hunting, fishing, sports, you know, throwing each other into the walls and stuff like that, I just wonder if that would have made a difference.

Summary of Results for Research Question 3

Five of the parents in the current study indicated that there was nothing that their children said or did that made the disclosure harder to hear or made the news less

acceptable. One parent found it upsetting that his child had to be prompted to tell him and another parent believed that if she had been told the news in person that might have taken it better. One major concern for the majority (58%) of the parents that made the news harder to hear was the thought that their children's lives would be more difficult based on their identity as a gay or lesbian individual and that they were now at greater risk of becoming the victims of assault or a hate crime. Interestingly, none of the parents cited fear of HIV infection in these safety based concerns. 33% of the parents shared that concerns regarding their effectiveness as parents or fears that they might have somehow been responsible for a child's homosexuality made the disclosure harder to hear.

Research Question 4

How does a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of sexual orientation change over time?

Categories and Examples

1. The parent describes his or her level of satisfaction with the disclosure

(Appendix O, 145).

Greg:

I'm very impressed with how he planned it. I was very impressed that he didn't beat around the bush. I was very impressed with he was prepared for anything.

Holly:

I thought it was very gentle and kind, and the thing that I remember about it the most was that she was more worried about me than she was about her.

2. The parent discusses any changes in the perception of a child's sexual orientation, or the disclosure itself, since the disclosure occurred (Appendix O, 147).

Greg:

But I do...I really mean this, if I could go back to 1981 when he was born

and change a gene or whatever it was that made him this way, but I wouldn't be sure that he would be the same Scott that we had for 18 years at that time, I really wouldn't change him.

Sarah:

They're both hard-working and honest and generous and almost to a fault. And it's just, it makes me thankful and it makes me upset with myself about things I wish.

Summary of Results for Research Question 4

Overall, 83% (or 10) of the parents in the current study were generally satisfied with the various methods that their children used to disclose this information. Dissatisfaction tended to involve some aspect of forced or prompted disclosure; a feeling that the child was not making the disclosure because he or she wanted to. Satisfaction with the disclosure was often related to a parent's perception that the child was thoughtful or caring in the way the information was shared. Other common themes involved awareness that the child felt secure enough within the parent/child relationship that it could withhold the sharing of potentially volatile news and that the child was courageous or brave for disclosing this information. None of the parents reported any change in their perception of the disclosure over time. In other words, they feel as positively today about the ways in which their children shared this information as they did at the time of the actual disclosure. Eight of the parents did state that they are currently more accepting of their child's sexual identity than they were when they first learned of it.

Research Question 5

What is the "ideal" scenario in which a parent would prefer to have his or her child's sexual orientation disclosed?

Categories and Examples

1. The parent describes any changes that he or she would make to the coming out scenario (Appendix P, 149).

Diana:

I wish that I had known more. Been more enlightened. And I apologized to him later for anything that I had ever said about gays that was hurtful.

Linda:

Maybe just a little more formal, "Mom, dad, I have to talk to you." I would have liked that just a little bit better. Because when she told me I was dealing with so much emotionally with her leaving. It was a little more overwhelming.

2. The parent shares advice for children who are preparing to come out (Appendix P, 151).

Diana:

I would tell them to start up front by saying "I love you very much and I don't want to hurt you but I do have something I have to say. And I have to tell you out of respect to you and because we've always had an honest relationship and because I want to have an honest relationship with you." And then I guess I'd just say it. And I guess, Scott asked us to...I think Greg asked him what are we supposed to do? And Scott said "Just love me anyway." And that was a good answer.

Karen:

One thing that's very important and I tell this to _____, think how many years it's taken you to realize what you are. Don't expect your parents to suddenly understand in a week, a few months, or a few years what maybe it's taken you four or five or more years to understand. You have to give people time to adjust, to work through it. Particularly if they're like myself and had no clue.

3. The parent discusses thoughts about the child's age at disclosure (Appendix P, 156).

Grace:

Had he been much younger, in high school for example, and again, maybe it's because I'm not well enough...I hear in ALLIES you know, "I probably

knew I was gay when I was in second grade” and I’m going “What? How could you know that?” And I guess if Brian had said that to me as a Junior in high school, I’m not sure that I would have been convinced of that.

Tom:

And it’s like, whether, this is her, she’s fourteen and it’s like, there’s lots of things you go through and I think...I’m just trying to speak for me and I think there’s lots of exploring to do and she may well be a lesbian for life or she may well drift into other venues or styles of life or be bi or find some guy she clicks with or finds a woman she clicks with, and just anything is fine...Because I think she’s got a very strong sense of self and so I trust her, but as much as I can trust any fourteen year old to know themselves.

Summary of Results for Research Question 5

Six of the parents in the current study, or 50% of the sample, mentioned that there was little to nothing that they would change about the way they learned about their child’s sexual orientation. Of those parents that did suggest alterations to how the disclosure occurred, the most commonly mentioned addition was to have more information about the process through which the child determined his or her sexual orientation. Similar to this request was more information about the homosexual community and homosexual issues in general. Other suggestions included a more formal disclosure, hearing the news in a private and familiar environment, and learning his information earlier in a child’s life. Five of the parents stated that they would have preferred to learn this information as soon as the child was certain, even if that meant the child was younger when the disclosure occurred. These parents agreed that if the child was too young when he or she came out, they might doubt the certainty with which the child made the disclosure. Seven of the participants seemed to agree that the

demarcation point for this degree of certainty occurs somewhere between late high-school age and college age.

When asked to speak from their perspectives as parents about the best way to disclose this type of information, the participants in the current study had quite a bit to offer. This information will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V and the parent's specific responses can be found in Appendix P on page 149. General themes related to this topic included the sharing of the child's process, being prepared to answer questions, being respectful and allowing parents time to absorb and adapt to the news, as well as providing them information about the homosexual community and any relevant support resources.

Research Related Theme

While the following categories do not directly address any of the five main research questions, they do speak to the parent's experiences as they negotiated their way through the disclosure moment. Given that the research on parent's experiences of a coming out is limited and often conducted from the child's perspective, it seemed prudent to present any additional information on this topic from the parent's perspective. The categories presented in this section all relate to the following research related theme: What does a parent experience as a child discloses his or her sexual orientation?

Categories and Examples

1. The parent describes the events that immediately preceded the disclosure (Appendix Q, 158).

Greg:

So I remember he came home from spring break and we were in the back yard barbequing, my wife really likes it when I barbeque. And so I was out there cooking hamburgers or steaks or whatever, and Scott usually sits out there with me, and this time he was out there and said "After we eat, why don't we go out to Starbucks or something. I have something I'd like to tell you."

Holly:

They went to bed and we were going to my parents for the Fourth of July and we were taking two cars for some reason, I don't know why, and her dad said "Why don't you ride with Gwen and I'll meet you all there." So I thought "Okay." And I think they had set it up so that she could talk to me, because he knew the night before. And we got in and she was kind of trembling, her hand, and I was like "Gwen are you okay?" and she said "I'm fine mom." And about five or six miles down the road she was like (big inhale of breath) "Well." And I was like "Okay."

2. The parent states the exact wording that a child used to disclose his or her sexuality (Appendix Q, 162).

Steven:

And he, as I recall he just sort of blurted it out, and said, "I've been wanting to share something with you. And, you know, I think I'm gay." And I said, "Well, that's not something you think you are." In fact, I think what I said was "Brian, that's like being pregnant, you either are or you aren't." So he said "Okay, I'm gay."

Greg:

And he said, and I can't remember the exact words, but he said "There's something I want to tell you. I'm gay." He just said it.

3. The parent describes what happened immediately following the disclosure (Appendix Q, 163).

Diana:

We went on and we talked probably an hour or two. We talked a long time up there. And he told us that he had realized that he had a problem at college when everybody, the movie had ended and everyone was talking about the girls in the movie, and he was thinking about the guys in the movie and couldn't remember what the girls looked like. So I thought "Okay." My husband asked him if he had, "If you see a guy do you have thoughts?" And he said he does, so I thought "Okay." And he said he wasn't, he said kissing a girl was like kissing a sister, there was just nothing there. So we went on through that, and he just sat there and went through stuff like that, on and on. And we went home and he went to bed. And it was the start of spring break

and I remember thinking “I don’t know how we’re going to make the week.” Because I just wanted him to go away. I just almost didn’t want to see him, and I don’t know why. And we were supposed to go see my best friend the next day in Dallas. And my husband and I sat up and talked about whether we should go or not because they had a son a year younger and they usually share a bedroom. And now that we know this, what do we do?

Sarah:

My husband came home and he came down to where we were sitting and talking and Brent told him. And I can remember, I think he was sitting in my chair, my husband was, and I stood there with my hands on his shoulders, and I couldn’t look at him.

4. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were either behavioral or physical in nature (Appendix Q, 165).

Diana:

It was more like nausea, floating. Like, I don’t know whether...it was just like you’ve been hit in the stomach kind of. And everything was calm. No one raised their voice. Nobody argued. It was extremely calm.

Karen:

And I remember taking her into my arms and saying “I love you. Nothing has changed. You’re still the wonderful young person you’ve always been.” I think it was just a hard thing for her.

5. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were emotional in nature (Appendix Q, 168).

Greg:

For me there was that huge sense of embarrassment and a sense of failure.

Judy:

I mean I was scared. It’s going to be harder; it’s not going to be as easy...And any mother, you want to protect your kid and so it’s like, it’s just yeah, a little bit of sadness also.

6. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were cognitive in nature (Appendix Q, 170).

Carol:

I think...I don't know how to say what I'm thinking...more like this was something that Phil, he was kind of a "cause" person, and he still is, and that this was something maybe that he thought...and had talked himself into, rather than, not thinking about feelings or anything, but just that it was something that he talked himself into.

Holly:

It probably seems very selfish but it was all about myself. I was thinking "I could have been a better mom" or something. Mostly it was the divorce...that I hadn't modeled a good marriage or that I could have done something. And the next thing I think...come to think of it was "Oh my God...I hope she's going to be happy. I hope this is going to work out for her." Because I want her to have...I've always worried that she was never going to have a good full relationship because she's pushed everybody away her whole life except for her sister.

7. The parent discusses the child's response to the parent's reaction to the disclosure
(Appendix Q, 173).

Grace:

And I think he said, you know "You can ask me any questions that you want to ask me." But I really was so uninformed I guess about the gay lifestyle or about relationships or whatever.

Greg:

He had prepped us very well before we went, he didn't beat around the bush, he just told us, and then he did a lot of listening. But he was very pained too. He was pained for us, and I think there was almost some sense of relief in his mind that he had done what he had to do and then he was waiting to see how we reacted. And he...it was a very brave thing for anyone to do.

8. The parent describes his or her most vivid memory from the disclosure moment
(Appendix Q, 175).

Sarah:

And I remember the one thing that really upset me...he said, and this was to me because his dad was still gone, that he would understand if we didn't want to pay for school anymore...Just the part where he talked about school. If we didn't want to pay for it anymore and my reaction to that. It was kind of like, and this is not the same thing, but when my mom had breast cancer and had a mastectomy, and I cried and cried afterwards. And everyone thought that it was because of the mastectomy, and it wasn't. It was because she was alive and had survived the surgery. And that

was kind of the way this situation was. I wasn't crying because of what he told me, but because of what he thought that we would do. That he would think that. It was hard.

Linda:

I think more than anything else it was just finally knowing that she was gay.

Summary of Results for Research Related Theme

The information shared by the parents in this section reveals that their children utilized a variety of methods and settings in which to disclose their sexual orientations. While many of the disclosures occurred within the home, some occurred in settings as varied as in the car, over the phone, or in a public setting. Nine of the children directly stated their sexual orientation to their parents, although situations did occur in which the information was elicited from the child by the parent. Parents indicated that after the disclosure they continued to discuss the topic with their children for some time and frequently commented upon their children's apparent willingness to keep this dialogue open, often citing how grateful they were for this. They also expressed how helpful it was that their children responded to their reactions in relatively calm and open ways. Several parents believed that if this had not been the case they would have had a more negative reaction to the disclosure.

Immediate parental reactions to the disclosure reflected those that are often cited in the literature on this topic (see Chapter II). Several parents reported feelings of shock and sadness upon hearing this news and attributed this to reasons ranging from sorrow over lost dreams for the child, to astonishment that they had never conceived that their child might be gay prior to this moment. Some parents reported a vague sense of relief that they finally had a definitive answer to a question they never fully knew how to ask.

Only one parent reported feeling anger during the time of the disclosure, but this anger was not directed at the child or related to the disclosure itself, but rather to the situation the child was in at the time. Initial thoughts tended to center on finally having confirmation of suspicions about a child's sexuality and doubts that a child could be so certain about this information. Also common were thoughts relating to possible parenting deficiencies that may have contributed to the formation of a homosexual identity. Several parents mentioned thoughts related to the loss of traditional heterosexual milestones such as marriage and the birth of grandchildren.

A number of themes emerged when parents shared their most vivid memories from the time of the disclosure. One of these themes was compassion for the child as the parent began to perceive that the future may be more difficult than they had once believed. Parents also remembered how brave or courageous a child needed to be in order to disclose such personal and potentially damaging information to someone that was so important to them. Other memories centered on the sense of relief that came with awareness of a child's sexual orientation, and sadness that a child might have doubted a parent's ability to respond favorably to such a disclosure. One parent mentioned that her most vivid memory involved blaming herself for her child's lesbian identity, while another parent indicated that her concern over how her husband would take the news stood out the most vividly in her mind.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the end, qualitative research is rooted in the subjective experiences and world-views of people simply living their lives. Their stories and the data they provide are influenced by a limitless number of factors, the least of which can have a significant impact on how an event is perceived. The task of the qualitative researcher is to sift through all of these seemingly unconnected moments of life and knit together a cohesive whole, an explanation for why people view their lives and experiences the way that they do. Just as the narratives contained within this dissertation are subjective and influenced by outside factors, so are my interpretations of the data that have been derived from these narratives. My perspectives on the factors that allow a parent to experience the news that a child is homosexual might be completely different than those of another individual looking at the same data set, as they should be. These different perspectives are what drive the development of theory and guide the practical application of research.

This final chapter will serve as the last stage in the constant comparative method which I outlined in Chapter III; writing the theory. Because this study appears to be one of the first to investigate parental reactions to the coming out moment from the parental point of view, the task of writing the theory will be done in an applied way. I will present the conclusions derived from the findings of the current study and discuss their implications for the understanding of parental satisfaction and reaction to the coming out moment. The child's perspective will also be addressed within this theoretical

framework, as several of the conclusions have the potential to increase the likelihood of a child developing a successful and satisfying disclosure scenario.

Given that the main focus of the current study is on the factors that determine a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation, it would seem prudent to begin this section with a brief discussion of this issue. Based on the information presented by the participants in this study, it seems as though there is very little that any of their children could have said or done differently to change their satisfaction with the disclosure moment. Overall perceptions of satisfaction with the disclosure were remarkably positive, despite the fact that parents were able to identify elements of the disclosure that they were displeased with. For example, compare one father's comments regarding his satisfaction with his son's disclosure...

Greg:

I'm very impressed with how he planned it. I was very impressed that he didn't beat around the bush. I was very impressed with he was prepared for anything...I remember, I think he prepared us. I'm glad he did it that way...And I'm glad he didn't flaunt it. I'm glad it wasn't "Get over it."...He was very sympathetic to what we were going through.

and his statement regarding what aspects of the disclosure made the news difficult to hear...

Greg:

You know, I really can't think of anything.

against his statements about how he would restructure the disclosure to be a more ideal situation for him:

Greg:

I think probably, he probably would have been a little less tense if we didn't do it at Starbucks. I remember the fear of someone else hearing...we should have had dinner and maybe just sat by the pool...So, but personally I

would have been much happier with the three of us being in a totally private situation...Yeah, selfishly finding a place that would minimize my fear of somebody hearing.

Here, Greg is clearly sending two completely different messages. On the one hand he is saying that there is nothing about the disclosure that he would change, nothing about its content or the structure of the disclosure itself that made the news any more difficult to hear. On the other hand he is very clearly stating that the disclosure occurring in such a public place was significantly distressing to him and that if he had it to do all over again it would occur in a private setting. In fact, Greg spoke at length in his interview about how intensely uncomfortable and pained he was at having to hear this news in a public setting.

In the following statements, other parents express their thoughts regarding what elements of the disclosure, if any, made the news harder to hear:

Grace:

I don't see how he could have done it any...you know it was hard to hear but I don't know how he could have said it any more gently than what he did.

Steven:

But, I don't think that there was anything that he did that could have made it gone any better.

Diana:

I don't think he said anything that made it harder. I think it was just hard to swallow, because we just had big hopes for an easier, normal situation. I mean easier, the traditional situation.

Judy:

I don't think so.

Here, some of the parents discuss their overall satisfaction with the disclosure itself:

Steven:

I think that was good.

Diana:

I thought it was fine.

Carol:

I don't think it could have been any different.

Judy:

Um, I feel very good about it.

Tom:

I just can't think of a better scenario. It just...I think it was fine.

Sarah:

I think that he did it fine.

Holly:

I really was fine with it.

Linda:

It was fine.

As was the case with Greg, all of these parents expressed positive attitudes regarding their overall satisfaction with the way in which their children disclosed to them.

Similarly, the majority of these parents were able to point out important changes that they would make to the disclosures in order to make the experience more satisfying or positive, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

A schism exists between a parent's perception of the disclosure and their actual experience of the disclosure itself. This schism seems to be rooted in the parent's relationship to the child in question. For the parents in current study, disclosure satisfaction seems to be linked to their feelings towards their children, while their attitudes regarding specific details of the disclosure appear to be independent of this relationship.

The parents' compartmentalization of these two aspects of the disclosure process can be attributed to two distinct components within the disclosure; relational components and process components. Relational components are those aspects of the parent/child dynamic that influence a parent's feelings of satisfaction in relation to the disclosure experience. Process components are the specific elements of the disclosure moment that influence a parent's ability to assimilate the information shared by the child and subsequently allow for the integration of that information into their schema of the child and the parent/child relationship. I will begin the next section of this chapter by discussing these two separate components in greater detail.

Relational Components

The central theme in the relational components domain is the parent's overall positive regard towards their children. As a whole, these parents described their children in flattering terms and viewed the parent/child relationship as strong and healthy. This attitude is best captured by the following example:

Diana:

Well, he was always the perfect child. Everyone said that it wasn't fair, that I didn't know how it was because he always did well in school, he played the piano beautifully, he always behaved, he was respectful. I never had a problem at all. He was the perfect child. And we were very close. I felt like I could talk to him about anything, and vice versa. I really feel like we had a good relationship...It really was almost too perfect. I should have known better. I should have known something was wrong I guess, because he wasn't, we didn't go through the typical problems with teenagers and boys, being rude to their mothers, you know. He didn't do any of that...It was wonderful. The kid was, and is still, incredible.

Diana's affection and regard for her son is readily apparent. She even alludes to the idea that her perception of her son was so positive that it might have impaired her judgment

where he was concerned. A similar phenomenon can be found in the following statement by a father who is describing his relationship with his son:

Steven:

It was probably not what I had anticipated as a father, in terms of a father/son relationship, but that was not a problem either.

In this instance, vague disappointment about the father/son relationship is quickly reframed to become accepting of the dynamic.

This pattern of positive attribution was found throughout my interviews with the parents and was especially prominent in discussions regarding satisfaction with the disclosure. For example, in the following quotations note how the language that these mothers use to describe their satisfaction with their children's disclosures is in some ways more indicative of their feelings towards their children than of the disclosures themselves:

Grace:

For us to have heard, or, I think it was just a much kinder, thoughtful...I guess thoughtful way for Brian to be sensitive to our feelings and have a situation where we could...it wasn't just letting us know, but so that we could talk about it and discuss it with him.

Diana:

I thought it was fine. I think it was a pretty hard thing to do, and I thought it took a lot of courage.

Holly:

I really thought that she put a lot of thought into it and into the way she told me. And it was safe and I could cry and we were both in control and laughing when we got there.

The pattern continued to reveal itself as the parents discussed what aspects of the child's disclosure made the news easier to hear:

Greg:

Because I didn't want to be angry at him because he was suffering with us. It almost would have been cruel to strike out at him. So I think that actually, I'm glad I cried instead of got angry. And I think his attitude and his demeanor actually helped me to do that.

Grace:

And I guess that's why I was so comfortable in a way with Brian telling us at that point in time, because again I know he struggled with it. I know he tried to either make certain or whatever. And after, and again, I've seen him develop and I've seen him...he's bright and articulate and all of those things and I knew it was okay. I felt comfortable that he knew. And if he knew then I in turn had to be able to accept that.

As was the case in the previous examples, these parents use positive characteristics of their children to explain their reactions to the disclosure.

This pattern can be partially explained by attribution theory. Attribution theory is used to explain how individuals interpret events and how these events relate to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The first psychological theory of attribution was proposed by Heider (1958), although it is Weiner (1986) who developed the theoretical framework on which most current research on attribution theory is based. Weiner's (1995) attribution model has demonstrated that emotional experiences such as anger, guilt and shame can be linked to one's perceptions of controllability, or whether or not one believes that a behavior is controllable. In its simplest form, attribution consists of a three-stage process. First, a person must perceive or observe a behavior. Next, the person must believe that the behavior was intentionally performed. Finally, the person must determine whether or not the behavior was forced. If the behavior is perceived as having been forced, then its cause is attributed to the situation, but if it is perceived as not

having been forced, then the cause is attributed to the individual performing the behavior (Kearsley, 1994).

In the current study two parents, Tom and Sarah, perceived their children as having been forced to disclose their sexual orientations to them. These were the only two parents to express dissatisfaction with the ways in which their children came-out to them. Through the interviews it can be inferred that the other ten parents perceived their children as not having been forced to disclose their sexual orientations. These parents all expressed satisfaction with their children's disclosures, despite the fact that many of them were able to pinpoint specific aspects of the disclosure that they would change. Because Tom and Sarah linked the disclosure with the situation in which it occurred they perceived the disclosure as inherently negative. Conversely, the other parents linked the disclosures to their children, and because they had positive feelings towards their children, they had positive feelings towards the disclosure. As was mentioned previously, this is only a partial explanation of the schism between parental satisfaction and actual beliefs about the disclosure moment. This topic will be discussed further in section devoted to areas for further research.

Process Components

As defined above, the term process components as used in this study refers to those specific elements of the disclosure moment that influence a parent's ability to assimilate the information shared by the child and subsequently allow for the integration of that information into their schema of the child and the parent/child relationship. Some of these components are based on the experiences of the interviewees while others are

hypothetical and are based on the advice that these parents would give to children who are preparing to come-out to their parents. These components can be divided into the following six categories:

1. Pre-Disclosure Preparations
2. Parent Oriented Factors
3. Addressing Parental Doubts and Concerns
4. Affirming the Parent/Child Relationship
5. Qualities of the Disclosure
6. Providing Education

Pre-Disclosure Preparations

Based on the experiences of the parents in the current study it would appear that there are several steps that a child can take before coming out that will allow his or her parents to hear this news in a more accepting way. These pre-disclosure preparations act as a sort of inoculation against a prolonged negative reaction to the disclosure and may serve as a catalyst for an expedited integration of this information within a positive context. The pre-disclosure preparations include introducing parents to the idea of the homosexual community as early as possible, rehearsing for the disclosure and providing a formal pre-disclosure announcement.

One previous study found that as parents increased their exposure to the homosexual community and gained a broader understanding of what it means to be a homosexual, their acceptance of their children's sexualities increased (Saltzburg, 2004).

These findings were borne out in a more personal way in the current study. Consider the following statements:

Karen:

But I grew in the San Francisco Bay area near Berkley and am used to seeing a lot of gay people, so was probably much more receptive than my husband, and my whole family in California was also very receptive and I think it's because of where I was born and raised and lived as a kid.

Holly:

Like I said I had lots of experience with gay guys, both of my brothers are gay and they're partnered...I've seen what they've been through their whole lives.

Linda:

I have a lot of friends that are gay.

Judy:

And I really had no contact with anyone gay as I grew up, although in my family my uncle, I guess it was kind of thought that he was gay, but he never came out at all...But then my husband and I coming up to _____, it was actually the first time I really got involved with gay women. And I just got more and more involved. And I led a group, and a person I became friends with, she was gay, I was straight, and we called it the lesbian/non-lesbian group. And I got to know some of these stereotypes and it was just wonderful.

These statements were from parents whose immediate reactions to their children's disclosures were positive or accepting. The every day reality of gay or lesbian individuals was relatively common for these parents, so the process of including their children in this group was not as difficult. Now consider the following examples from parents who had little or no awareness of or contact with the homosexual community prior to learning about their children's sexual orientations:

Diana:

My husband told me after the fact that my boss who I worked for, for three years, twenty something years ago, was gay. And I said "He was not" and he said "He was too." I had no idea he was either because I didn't know enough to know it. I

didn't recognize it...But I didn't know enough to know and my husband can't believe I was that naïve.

Carol:

Not any at all except a couple of work situations where there was someone that was, once in _____ working for the V.A...I believe there were two people there who I knew that were gay. One was a nice guy, just a regular guy, and the other one was the painted fingernails, very...you know what I'm talking about...Very, very different.

Sarah:

No. There was one guy in my office that we kind of thought was...and for no reason.

When compared with the first group of parents, these individuals reacted to their children's disclosures with more negative affect and doubt. They questioned their children's certainty in a more active way and had more negative perceptions of what it would mean for their children to be members of the homosexual community. As opposed to the first set of parents, these individuals had minimal contact with or awareness of the homosexual community prior to the disclosure, and what little they did have was relatively superficial.

These data suggest a trend in that the more direct and personal contact a parent has with gay or lesbian persons and issues prior to a child's disclosure, the more likely that parent is to hear the child's disclosure in a more positive or accepting way. How to bring about this contact could be somewhat of a challenge and will vary on case by case basis. Regardless of how this is done, without this previous exposure a child's disclosure has the potential to be more volatile and evocative than it would be with it.

Many of the parents in the current study commented on the awareness that their children seemed well prepared for their disclosures. For example:

Holly:

I really thought that she put a lot of thought into it and into the way she told me and it was safe and I could cry and we were both in control and laughing when we got there.

Greg:

I'm very impressed with how he planned it. I was very impressed that he didn't beat around the bush. I was very impressed with he was prepared for anything...The fact that he was so prepared. I think we could have said "Get the hell out of here. Pack up and never come back." I think he was ready for that.

Diana:

I guess...not a thing as much as just the fact that I was so impressed, even in all of the confusion and being so upset, I was so impressed with the way he handled himself. The way that he had obviously thought it through.

Rehearsing for the disclosure and anticipating how it might progress was a process that parents also discussed:

Sarah:

So just be prepared for different reactions from each parent. Because they could react differently from each other...When you find this out it's almost like having a death in the family. You go through the seven stages of grief. You grieve and you're angry and it's true. And I think the child has to accept that and has to be prepared for whatever emotion is going to come pouring out.

Greg:

The other thing is, I think, it is, try to figure out how your parents will react to it.

Linda:

Because if your parents are going to be horrible about it, I don't even know if I'd want to even tell them.

Rehearsing the words that one plans to use when disclosing this type of information and attempting to anticipate possible reactions from one's parents seems to serve two important purposes. First, it prepares the child for a wide range of eventualities and allows them to respond to the parents in a more confident and authoritative manner. Second, it sends a subtle message to the parents that the disclosure

is a reality and that the child is confident about sharing this part of themselves with the parents. Confidence is an important aspect of a coming out that will be discussed as a part of the necessary affective elements of the disclosure moment.

Many of the parents were in agreement that a disclosure of this magnitude deserves a relatively formal presentation, which includes a prelude to the disclosure itself:

Greg:

And so I was out there cooking hamburgers or steaks or whatever, and Scott usually sits out there with me, and this time he was out there and said "After we eat, why don't we go out to Starbucks or something. I have something I'd like to tell you." And I remember at the time, I think that was when I remember thinking "I bet I know what this is." ... Yeah, and his body language and the way he sort of just blurted it out, he was nervous. That wasn't a normal request, like he wrecked the car or something. There was definitely something on his mind... I remember I had a sense of foreboding. And I remember it did cross my mind. "I wonder if he's going to say that he's gay." ... Personally I would much rather have had that because I think it allowed me to be prepared. I think I would have been much more upset if it would have been "Hey let's go to Starbucks" and then sat down and "Hey mom and dad, I'm gay." ... It allowed me to prepare... It was bad news, but I had time to prepare. I'm glad he did it.

Karen:

I think she started out with that she had something really important that she wanted to share with me and that she'd already shared it with her brother and she was hoping that I would be very receptive and she actually had left little tidbits out for me but I went right to bed and never saw them... But I would say she was a little nervous and I figured it was something it was very, very important and something that she was very hesitant on sharing but it was something she felt she wanted to do.

Linda:

Maybe just a little more formal, "Mom, dad, I have to talk to you." I would have liked that just a little bit better.

Whether this pre-disclosure announcement occurs significantly before the disclosure as occurred in Greg's situation, or immediately precedes it, this precursor

serves a very important purpose; it allows the parents to prepare themselves. In Greg's case this advanced warning allowed him to deduce what was to come and he was able to begin preparing himself for this eventuality, thus lessening the overall impact of the disclosure. In addition, this sort of tip-off can convey respect for one's parents and for the situation itself which strengthens the feelings of certainty that were discussed above.

In addition to the preparations that a child can take, there is an important pre-disclosure variable that is primarily parent-focused; a parent's suspicions that a child might be homosexual prior to the disclosure itself. The majority of parents who suspected that their children might be either gay or lesbian prior to the disclosure reported that they were less affected by the disclosure than they might have been without it. The following examples help illustrate this point:

Grace:

I didn't but Steven did...I remember the day he said to me, and again Brian was a Jr. in high school, "I would not be surprised if Brian's not gay."...I don't recall that I even responded, but in retrospect I've said over and over how glad I was that at least that was planted...I still didn't expect it, but I think that because of that it wasn't just a total surprise.

Steven:

Well, that's kind of a, it's a difficult one for me to answer, because in truth I have felt that Brian was probably gay since he was three or four years old...It was not a great revelation; it was not a great surprise to me.

Judy:

I don't know if it was before she was born or while I was pregnant with her. I had, and I don't know, but I believe in all of these things, I had a very strong intuition that she was going to be gay...And I just, it was like, in a way it was a shock, but a recognized shock, because like I said I'd had this incredible intuition and it was almost like "Oh my God, my intuition was right." And I was shocked and surprised, in way, even though you might say I was prepared, you might say.

It is clear that these parent's suspicions that their children might be gay or lesbian prior to the disclosure allowed them to experience the disclosure moment in a slightly less intense or upsetting way than they might have without it. In contrast, consider the following example, in which Sarah discusses her lack of awareness that her daughter was anything but straight:

Sarah:

Not at all...No, and even knowing now and looking back I don't see it...Oh, I was totally devastated.

In this instance the lack of an intuitive awareness removed any protective factors that might have lessened the impact of the disclosure on the parent.

Parents base their perceptions of a child's sexual orientation on a variety of factors, including social norms for gender appropriate behavior and stereotyped beliefs about typical homosexual behaviors, etc. Examples of these characteristics were provided by the parents in the current study and are too numerous to list here (please refer to Appendix L, pages 125 and 127). Regardless of how a parent becomes suspicious of a child's sexual orientation, once a child decides to come-out to his or her parents it may be to the child's advantage to provide subtle hints or clues as to their sexual orientation prior to the actual disclosure. This approach was even advocated for by one of the interviewees:

Karen:

But if there have been little hints that have been dropped along that maybe they'll be more observant than I was, and maybe it wouldn't be as much of a shock to them.

Parent Oriented Factors

Perhaps the most critical component of a satisfying and effective disclosure scenario involves using the parents as a guidepost for how much information is appropriate to share. In other words, meeting them where they're at. This may seem counterintuitive at first. Is it not the case that the coming out process is focused on the individual who is doing the coming out? I would argue that when the individual is coming out to someone he or she loves and respects, the coming out moment is as much about the disclosure recipient as it is about the discloser. The discloser is inviting the recipient to enter in to a deeper and more honest relationship, and such an invitation should be given with the care and respect it deserves. As such, children should attempt to ensure that the disclosure occurs at a time when the parents will be able to hear the news, should respect their parent's time-frame for absorbing and adjusting to this news, and should not provide any information to the parents that they do not directly ask for or that seems irrelevant or inappropriate.

When choosing the right moment to come-out to a parent, a child should do everything within his or her power to ensure that the disclosure occurs at an appropriate time. Coming out impulsively or at a time which puts the needs of the child before the needs of the parent can lead to a decidedly negative or resistant response:

Sarah:

She and a friend of hers from high-school had gone to see the Lillith Fair, and it was a male friend. And they were going to stay in a hotel, separate rooms, and she was going to call me when she got there. And she didn't call and she didn't call, and my husband was working out of town and I was worried about her. So I called the motel to see if they had checked in, and the girl at the desk said yes, so I asked for the room and she told me there was only one room. So I was upset. I thought "I trust you and this is what you do." So she connected me to the room

and the boy answered and I asked to speak to Ashley and I was just livid. I talked to him and said "She's only 17 years old, she's underage and you're going to be in a lot of trouble." And he was just stuttering, he didn't know what to say. I was really going off on him. So she got on the phone and she was crying and I said "I'm going to have your brother come get you.", because Brent lived in _____. And she's crying and she kept telling me "It's not what you think" and I said "Don't tell me what I think. I know what I think and I know what it is." She said "No mom" and she was crying, and she said "I think I'm gay". And I said "What?" I honestly don't remember the rest of the conversation. That's all that I can remember. She's crying and I'm crying and it was not a good experience.

Karen:

So I got the news as I was coming in from Kuwait at about 12:30 in the morning, and I was just jet-lagged, and I said, "This is just not the time to talk about it."

By coming out in a way that protected her instead of protecting her mother, Sarah's daughter Ashley inadvertently created a situation in which her mother was automatically on the defensive and not likely to hear *any* news in a positive or accepting way. Similarly, Karen's daughter Nichole came out to her mother at a time when she was physically and emotionally unable, and therefore unwilling, to hear such important information. In both scenarios, a situation was created in which the later integration of the disclosure was made that much more difficult. Both parent and child were unnecessarily distressed beyond what might be expected in this situation. Now consider the perceptions of parents whose children attempted to select an appropriate moment for the disclosure to occur:

Judy:

I remember...she had been gone to this camp, called Camp _____... So I guess, and she had just been back a day or two, so I guess my mindset was I had missed her...but I had missed her, so I was just really open to her being back and open to listening more, and so I was just really positive...It was just something that emerged. I was not even anticipating it at all...I liked that, I was in a good mood, or a good space and she seemed to be in a good space...we're sharing.

Grace:

But he had...we'd come home from work and he'd had a really nice dinner that he'd prepared...And we came in here to kind of just visit, and like I said he even selected the music and the whole thing. And we were just speaking about general stuff here in the living room...And we were talking about relationships and marriage and Steven asked the question "Well what are you looking for?" or something...I don't know if he used the word marriage or what he used, but he really led, he opened it up for Brian just to say, you know "I'm gay."

Steven:

I think that was good. It was a wonderful dinner, two kinds of wine, nice music, creating an environment. So, you know, one of the things that he was living out there...all of our major family conferences have been around here. If his sister was in trouble about something or if he had a problem or a concern, we always came together as a family right here in this exact spot. We even all have our own little places that we, that we would take up.

Regardless of how they may have reacted, these parents were more open to hearing the disclosure because their children, either purposefully or instinctively, selected a moment that was conducive to openness.

Once the actual disclosure has been made, children need to allow their parents the time to begin integrating this information before they expect a response from them:

Karen:

One thing that's very important and I tell this to _____, think how many years it's taken you to realize what you are. Don't expect your parents to suddenly understand in a week, a few months, or a few years what maybe it's taken you four or five or more years to understand. You have to give people time to adjust, to work through it. Particularly if they're like myself and had no clue...The most important thing I've already said, and that's not expecting your parents to jump to your side...They have to live through their expectations, and I think the child has to realize that every parent has expectations for their small baby on up to adulthood...and I think that for any parent the kids have to let them digest what they've come to understand.

Greg:

The other thing I would say, what Scott did, is just shut up and listen, and it's going to be a long several days and you're going to have to listen to every cockamamie thing you've ever read about. "Are you bi-sexual? Are you sure? Is

this a joke?" Just don't get angry, because they're grieving. Your parents are gonna...its, your child is basically dieing for a period of time.

Children also need to present the disclosure and information related to the disclosure at a pace that is appropriate for the parent:

Karen:

I would not mention if you had a boyfriend or a girlfriend because right now it's enough for the parent to understand and sort out what their expectations are for you. And to know that you now have a partner would be something they don't need to know right now. The important thing is to lay out the facts and the understanding and not go into that type of relationship. Don't explain more than what...let your parents ask the questions, then respond. Don't give them more than they can chew at the time.

Linda:

I think just to keep it general. Parents don't want to know real personal details, like kids don't want to know personal details about their parents.

Sarah:

Not to go into the boyfriend/girlfriend thing. Just to keep it "This is me I'm talking about" Not how they're involved with somebody. You kind of know that it's true but you don't want to hear it right away.

Tom:

I would warn them against trying to put it in the parents face to much. I would warn them against putting their parents in an awkward situation.

Karen:

I think a real strong positive was that she was very open. I had a lot of questions. She answered them. If there wasn't an answer she knew she offered to get back to me and she did.

Children can increase the likelihood that parents will not be overwhelmed by this life-altering information if they actively work to share this information at a pace that is appropriate for the parent, and do not force or expect the parent to respond immediately. Allowing parents to guide the rhythm of the disclosure provides them with a sense of control at a time where they are likely to feel out of control. What's more, in a subtle

way it conveys respect for the parent/child relationship and indicates that the child values the parent. This approach allows the child to meet the parent half way and invites the parent to complete the journey with the child as a guide.

Addressing Parental Doubts and Concerns

As a parent hears the news that a child is homosexual a wide variety of thoughts and feelings washes over them:

Greg:

But I remember obviously total shock, fear, almost a desperation just to get out.

Sarah:

It's amazing how so many thoughts can flash through your mind in a few seconds.

These thoughts and feelings are often tied directly to concerns and doubts that a parent has in relation to the disclosure. Parents reported concerns about their children's physical safety, and their ability to be happy and emotionally fulfilled within a same-sex relationship. Religious concerns were also on the mind of these parents as they began to assimilate this news, as were concerns related to the sharing of this information with others. Common doubts focused on the children as well as on the parents themselves. Child focused doubts were most often related to a child's certainty about their sexual orientation. Parent focused doubts tended to be associated with one's parenting skills and the possibility that a parent might be responsible for a child's homosexuality.

Perhaps the most immediate concern mentioned by parents in the current study involved a child's safety as an out member of the homosexual community. These concerns were primarily connected to the child's physical safety. Only one parent in the

current study mentioned a concern about HIV infection. The following examples illustrate these safety based concerns:

Greg:

“What about the sexual habits. You’re going to get sick and kill yourself.” I remember crying about that.

Carol:

Because you always hear about bad things happening to gay young men, and I was always terrified of something happening to him...And not of the AIDS type things, but more being assaulted or something.

Holly:

And she’s told me a lot of stories about hanging out in _____ and in lots of places where lesbians, gay men are discriminated against and even hurt physically. So I was scared.

Karen:

I think that one of my main concerns was...she had a friend who had a rainbow sticker on the back of her car and she was stopped at a traffic light in _____ and someone got out of a pick-up truck, and _____ had her window down, and he came in with his fist and just let her have it...So I think my main thing was concern for her, for her safety...I asked her that when she went out with her girlfriend that she not display affection in public, because I did not want people coming up and jumping her.

In addition to a child’s physical well-being, parents were concerned about their children’s emotional well-being as gay or lesbian individuals. Parents tended to mention fears that their children would not be able to find emotionally satisfying relationships or that they would not be able to cope with society’s marginalization of gay and lesbian individuals:

Grace:

I guess it’s because that I sensed that probably the life for a gay or lesbian must be much more challenging because of attitudes and especially in the state of _____ or in the south than what a heterosexual encountered. And that...I really worried about that. Concern for him, and concerned that he would find happiness I think...that he would be able to have a life.

Greg:

And I remember thinking, and I think I got...I didn't get angry, I think I was very upset, and saying "Scott, and what does this mean? You want to be a pediatrician." I think one of the things I feel most bad about is I said "What mother or father would want to bring their kid to a gay doctor. You've ruined your career." And I remember at point starting to be fearful for Scott.

Steven:

And I think I said something about that I was concerned about his future relationships because he was always been very much involved in the family and very committed to family, and this was going to mean that his family was a little different...And my God, the last group of people in our society that's going to receive the brunt of our need as a species to hate or look down on someone is probably going to be the gays and lesbians and I sure wish I could take that burden off of him." But you can't...Just concern that life is tough enough without having to be in that last group out there that society seems to feel is okay to hurt.

Holly:

It's the same thing if you have an interracial relationship. It's like "Oh my God. Do you realize what you're going to have to face?" There's that scary part of it. So that's why I was scared for her.

Linda:

And there's always just a little of "Oh no. Your life is going to be harder." With some of the conservative far right-wing kind of people.

Karen:

And I think my main thing is, here, for her, somebody looking at her as a category and not looking at her as the same loving young woman that she was before...I think that was really the main thing was the fear angle. And the way people just blank categorize people as these bad people, and they're not giving them a chance...And I think a lot of it, the people aren't willing to understand or take the time to understand that these are people first and they're like everybody else...the only difference is their sexual orientation, and that's it.

Despite the fact that only two of the twelve parents involved in the current study described themselves as "not religiously affiliated" (see Table ?), surprisingly few parents mentioned religious concerns as they discussed difficulties in assimilating their children's news. For those parents that did mention this theme, it proved to be a significant barrier to their ability to hear the news in a positive or accepting manner:

Greg:

And I remember being fearful for...we're pretty strong Christians, and I remember thinking "Oh my God, he's going to hell."

Linda:

It was like "I'm going to have to watch what church I'm going to."

The last type of concern mentioned by the parents in the current study centered on the notion of telling others that their children were gay or lesbian, or that they were the parents of gay and lesbian children. One parent expressed that this concern was the one aspect of the disclosure that made the news hard to hear:

Holly:

Well, she said she didn't want to tell my parents. And I asked her if she wanted her step-brothers to know because they were all there at that time and she said she didn't care. But that bothered me because I hated that we had to start out hiding things and in our society that we have to hide it, so that bothered me...But there's been a whole lot of ugly discussion about religion and God and all of this horrible stuff that we've listened too our whole life. So she wasn't really ready for them to find out.

Other examples of this concern are as follows:

Diana:

And we were worried about our girls. Because we had a girl in high-school that was right behind Scott and was in the band, and Scott had been in the band very active, and his crowd was there. And once it got out we were afraid that she would have problems.

Sarah:

It just, his grandfather, my dad, lived with us and we all decided that we shouldn't tell him. I don't know if he, he loved his grandson, but he was of an age where I don't know if he would have understood. So we all agreed it would be better if he didn't know.

Judy:

It's kind of like you want to share this information but yet you think you shouldn't share this with anybody.

Linda:

And just explaining it to some of my more conservative friends...It's just, if somebody can't accept it than they're not really my friend...Her grandmother knows and her grandfather doesn't because I don't think her grandfather could handle it. He's real religious.

Karen:

And also out in public because I saw everyone looking and I did not like the looks they were giving and I even had friends that made cracks about gays and what the parents must be like if these children...and she didn't know Nichole was gay. And that was very hard for me and actually ended the friendship. I tired and tried to convince her that these were normal people but it didn't do any good.

Just as concerns for their children acted as barriers to the parents' abilities to absorb their children's sexual orientations, parental doubts related to the disclosure also impeded this process. The child's ability to be certain about his or her sexual orientation was one of the most frequently cited doubts mentioned:

Grace:

Had he been much younger, in high school for example, and again, maybe it's because I'm not well enough...I hear in ALLIES you know, "I probably knew I was gay when I was in second grade" and I'm going "What? How could you know that?" And I guess if Brian had said that to me as a Junior in high school, I'm not sure that I would have been convinced of that.

Judy:

And I guess I have to admit that I don't know enough, but I thought part of me was thinking "Can she know already?" I mean that was my sense also inside. She was a couple weeks shy of fourteen, so I was thinking "Can you know already?" Because she hadn't gotten her period yet. I knew her hormones were kicking in and stuff and so I thought "Can you know this?" But I didn't even verbalize it.

Linda:

He asked her "Are you sure it's not a trend?" And several people have said that and I've always said, "When you were 15 were you sure you were straight?."

Diana:

I remember thinking, "I'm not even sure he knows what he's talking about."...You know what I mean, maybe he doesn't know any better. And he said he had more time to think about it than we had. And of course my husband was

like “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” And of course he kept trying to press him for more detail, like “Do you find yourself attracted?” My husband kept asking him things like, “What about that girl in line in front of you?”...Maybe he just hadn’t had enough girls, he had...my husband said that all guys question themselves at one moment in their life. So maybe he just didn’t know.

Carol:

I think...I don’t know how to say what I’m thinking...more like this was something that Phil, he was kind of a “cause” person, and he still is, and that this was something maybe that he thought...and had talked himself into, rather than, not thinking about feelings or anything, but just that it was something that he talked himself into.

Tom:

And it’s like, whether, this is her, she’s fourteen and it’s like, there’s lots of things you go through and I think...I’m just trying to speak for me and I think there’s lots of exploring to do and she may well be a lesbian for life or she may well drift into other venues or styles of life or be bi or find some guy she clicks with or finds a woman she clicks with, and just anything is fine... Because I think she’s got a very strong sense of self and so I trust her but as much as I can trust any fourteen year old to know themselves.

Interviewees also mentioned doubting their own abilities as parents when hearing the news that their children were gay or lesbian and indicated that this had an impact on their ability to hear the disclosure in a positive way:

Greg:

I remember talking to Diana that night, and it still crosses my mind to this day, that if I had been a more quote unquote father to him, hunting, fishing, sports, you know, throwing each other into the walls and stuff like that, I just wonder if that would have made a difference... “I wonder if I could have done something.” Maybe he was right on the border and I could have pushed him to be quote unquote normal. And I had a tremendous sense of guilt for quite a long time after that, and it still crosses my mind.

Grace:

Because I think, I don’t know, and I don’t believe this now at all, but it’s sort of that thing about “Did I, was the way I raised Brian, did I keep him to clean when he was little, did I not let him get dirty, did I not let him play roughhouse or whatever.” Was there something in his childhood upbringing that affected or...you just don’t know.

Diana:

My husband was like “Were we too strict on you. Were we too protective?” Yes we were probably.

Holly:

It probably seems very selfish but it was all about myself. I was thinking “I could have been a better mom” or something. Mostly it was the divorce...that I hadn’t modeled a good marriage or that I could have done something ...So that was my first reaction and my reaction for a long time after was that it was my fault.

As children begin to consider how they might come out to their parents, they must take into account the various concerns and doubts that parents experience as they hear this news and be prepared to address them:

Holly:

I think I would tell them that it’s important that they address that parents insecurities first, saying “You were a great dad.”

Judy:

So if you say to the parent “You’ve done all of those things and you’ve done it all right.” Because I know some parents can’t quite accept it and think “Oh what have I done wrong” but really what they’ve done is something right. They’ve allowed their child to know who they really are.

Diana:

I wouldn’t blame the parents, because they’re already doubting it and hurting and questioning it themselves.

While addressing these issues in the moment might not immediately alleviate any negative impact these concerns and doubts have on a parent’s ability to hear this news in an acceptable way, there may be some positive long-term gain. That is, as parents continue to ruminate on the disclosure moment they may be able to access the positive content presented at that time and subsequently incorporate this into their overall experience of the moment and their attitudes towards the information itself.

Affirming the Parent/Child Relationship

As a parent hears the news that a child is either gay or lesbian, the information itself can act as a perceived threat to the parent/child relationship. Parents may experience their children as familiar strangers, or they may interpret aspects of the child's disclosure as indictment on the parent's ability to be supportive:

Karen:

I think the hardest thing for parents is to realize they really have not changed and no one has forced them. God has made them somehow for some reason a different way than the parent is but there's nothing wrong with that.

Sarah:

And I remember the one thing that really upset me...he said, and this was to me because his dad was still gone, that he would understand if we didn't want to pay for school anymore...And it wasn't so much...and I'm getting emotional now...and it wasn't so much that I was so upset about what he told me but that he thought we didn't love him enough...I wasn't crying because of what he told me, but because of what he thought that we would do. That he would think that. It was hard.

Because these perceived threats can influence a parent's ability to satisfactorily incorporate this information, it becomes important for children to address this relationship directly within the disclosure in an affirming and positive manner:

Diana:

And one of the things he did say when he came out was that he respected us so much that he did not want to be dishonest with us...I would tell them to start up front by saying "I love you very much and I don't want to hurt you but I do have something I have to say. And I have to tell you out of respect to you and because we've always had an honest relationship and because I want to have an honest relationship with you." And then I guess I'd just say it. And I guess, Scott asked us to...I think Greg asked him what are we supposed to do? And Scott said "Just love me anyway." And that was a good answer.

Judy:

Prefacing it to the parent, that you're grateful to the parents for their qualities and how they've raised you, the child. And it's because of the way they were raised that they were able to be who they are completely, and that that is a gift.

“Thank you for this gift and you’ve allowed me to be who I am and I want to share with you that I’m gay and I want to thank you for raising me so I knew who I was.” ...And say, “I want to say thank-you for letting me feel comfortable enough that I can share this with you. You’re really incredible parents and I’m sitting here talking to you about this.”

Carol:

I would think just to try and be as loving and as up front as you can be...So I don’t know if you could really...other than just be honest. “This is the way it is and I still love you and I’m still me.”

As was the case with addressing parental concerns and doubts, affirming the parent/child relationship in the moment may not completely remove any parental negative reactions to the disclosure. Based on the parents in the current study, however, there is support for the notion that this will partially mitigate some of the negative impact of these fears, allowing the news to be heard in a more accepting, and satisfying, way.

Qualities of the Disclosure

In addition to the actual words that are used to disclose one’s sexual orientation, several non-verbal qualities are included along with the verbal message. As indicated by the parents in the current study these non-verbal qualities are just as important, if not more important, than the exact phrasing of the disclosure itself. Parents indicated that in addition to a disclosure that was as verbally direct as possible, a perception that a child was empathizing with the parent throughout the disclosure was important, as was the emotional tone of the disclosure and the certainty with which the disclosure was delivered.

Empathy is defined as the ability to share in another’s emotions, thoughts, or feelings (Agnes, 1999). Many of the parents in the current study indicated that they were

aware that their children were feeling with them throughout the disclosure moment. This stood out for one of the parents as a strong memory from the disclosure:

Greg:

He was very empathetic to what we were going through. He listened a lot. And when I said “What parent would take their son or daughter to a gay doctor” he just sort of nodded. He didn’t get angry, he didn’t fight back...But it was just “I’m going to get it out and I’m just gonna sit here and absorb everything that comes back to me.

Perceived empathy also served as a protective factor against the outpouring of negative emotions for this parent:

Greg:

Because I didn’t want to be angry at him because he was suffering with us. It almost would have been cruel to strike out at him. So I think that actually, I’m glad I cried instead of got angry. And I think his attitude and his demeanor actually helped me to do that.

Introductory counseling courses often teach empathy as a basic skill. It is a tool that allows a therapist to build an enduring connection with a client, a bond which encourages growth and change and which can endure stress and strain. Empathy serves a similar purpose within the coming out moment. It provides elasticity to a relationship that may be stretched to the breaking point by the news that a child is homosexual. The following example expresses why empathy during the disclosure is so critical:

Sarah:

When you find this out it’s almost like having a death in the family. You go through the seven stages of grief. You grieve and you’re angry and it’s true. And I think the child has to accept that and has to be prepared for whatever emotion is going to come pouring out.

The emotional tone of a message can directly influence how the message’s recipient receives and interprets the message. A message delivered in a cheerful manner is likely to be received positively, whereas a message delivered in an angry way is likely

to be met with defensiveness. Several of the parents commented on the importance of attending to the emotional tone of the disclosure:

Greg:

Don't make light of it. Don't make it a joke, or "Hey, guess what!" Be serious and...be serious, don't make it a joke and...oh shoot, I can't...just be serious with it.

Judy:

I guess not...you wouldn't want to be defensive about it or apologetic about it.

Diana:

I wouldn't blame the parents, because they're already doubting it and hurting and questioning it themselves.

Carol:

I would think just to try and be as loving and as up front as you can be.

Parents also recalled that the certainty and confidence with which a child made his or her disclosure had an impact on them:

Judy:

Just that she said she was gay and that she knew for a long time...And her feeling of confidence, which was really good.

Greg:

There was a sense of assurance about him that he would get through this, with or without us.

Holly:

She was very, very firm though.

As much as this certainty sends a message to parents that the child has accepted this part of him- or her-self and is prepared to move on with life, it invites the parents to begin their journey towards acceptance as well. Confidence also seems to have a calming effect on parents in the moment, a point which is well illustrated by Grace:

So I think he had done everything the right way, as far as I could tell, to make sure that he knew what he was...And I guess that's why I was so comfortable in a way with Brian telling us at that point in time, because again I know he struggled with it. I know he tried to either make certain or whatever. And after, and again, I've seen him develop and I've seen him...he's bright and articulate and all of those things and I knew it was okay. I felt comfortable that he knew. And if he knew then I in turn had to be able to accept that.

Providing Education

The notion that an individual's fear of something decreases as knowledge of that something increases has very real implications when it comes to the disclosure of one's sexual orientation. As parents begin to understand more about what it means to be homosexual, and specifically what it means for their children to be homosexual, any negative associations with homosexuality for these parents may begin to diminish. This concept was discussed as one of the pre-disclosure preparations for coming out, but it also has important implications for the actual disclosure itself:

Holly:

Well she said "I've been struggling with this for two years and that's why I've been so depressed and unhappy and I saw a counselor at Tech and I've read a book on the subject and I've done lots of research on it. I've thought about it." And she described to me that her growth of two years. She told me about how she'd gone out with all the lesbians, that she went out with them two or three times. And she said "You know, that was my last ditch effort to see if I was straight or not, and I knew I'm not." So she really just talked to me about her journey.

For this parent, the child's sharing of her process helped the parent hear the disclosure in a more positive and satisfying way. It actually made the disclosure easier to hear. Other parents shared that they would have welcomed this sort of information from their children:

Grace:

I suppose for me maybe having a little more information. A little better understanding of the progression of things. Maybe a little more understanding of how somebody comes to the realization, how they work through the process. I mean obviously, okay obviously he had six months of counseling, after he graduated from college he said "I'm not coming home for the summer, I'm taking my bike and going to Ireland and I'm not coming home until the fall." But, maybe in sharing, whether it was maybe in a letter that he might have written to talk about his experiences and coming to the realization that he was gay.

Diana:

I wish that I had known more. Been more enlightened. And I apologized to him later for anything that I had ever said about gays that was hurtful.

As the parents continued to discuss this idea, they talked about the importance of providing, or having access to, other types of educational materials either at the time of the actual disclosure or soon thereafter:

Sarah:

He had the PFLAG brochures and phone numbers and everything for me and I was kind of impressed with that, that he was trying to help me...But like I said he had the pamphlets and he told me where I could go to get some counseling or some support groups, so yeah, I thought he did a good job.

Karen:

But then I...a couple days later we went to her apartment in _____ and she had some books; Ellen DeGeneres' mother Betty and some other ones and I asked if I could take them home. She gave me about four books and I devoured them...I think one of the most important things that a child needs to understand is to have some information that's there. Nichole had some literature; she had the books sitting right next to me...Explain what PFLAG is...I think another good thing to do would be to get information on the Bible, because some parents will start quoting it. So it's important to get that information as well to look at, because this is what they're concerned about, they're afraid their pastor is going to tell them. So to find some research on that would be good.

Diana:

So my husband got on the internet and ordered probably a couple hundred dollars worth of books delivered over night on everything in the world.

The sharing of one's personal journey and providing education about homosexuality and the homosexual community is an important element of the disclosure moment. It can begin the process of reversing any negative perceptions that the parents may hold of gay or lesbian individuals, and it can also serve the purpose of reintroducing these parents to someone who they may temporarily experience as a familiar stranger.

Limitations of the Study

This study was a first step in attempting to describe a previously un-explored phenomenon. As a qualitative study, the results are not intended to generalize to all parents of gay and lesbian children. Rather, they describe the experiences of one subset of parents as they learned that their children were homosexual. The introductory chapter included a brief discussion of some of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methodology. In contrast, this section will highlight some of the specific limitations of the current study as it relates to the participants and the inability to generalize from the sample.

Perhaps the most blatant limitation of the current study is the homogeneity of the sample. Participants were all Caucasian parents of gay and lesbian children. All but two of the parents resided in Texas at the time of their interviews, and all but two of the parents identified themselves as being religiously affiliated. In addition, the majority of the parents were highly educated, having received at least a bachelor's degree. As members of this country's racial majority group, participants approached this study from an inherent position of power and privilege. Similarly, this study's participants were largely atypical and somewhat elite in their levels of educational attainment and

religious affiliation. This study lacks the perspective of significant minority groups, both ethnic and social, and its overall quality and transferability suffers because of it.

Another significant limitation of the current study is the potential role of a self-selection bias. Participants volunteered to participate in the interview process after the project was described to them by their children. It can be inferred that by choosing to participate, parents were ready to explore this experience and felt comfortable enough in their roles as the parents of a gay and lesbian children to consent to be interviewed. It is likely that the experiences of those parents who declined to be interviewed would be significantly different, and possibly more negative, than those parents whose stories are contained within this dissertation. The complete lack of negative parental attitudes, while heartening in some aspects, also serves to weaken the overall impact of the study.

The specific nature of the relationship that the parents in the current study had with their children both pre- and post-disclosure is also important to consider. At its core, this dissertation is a study of parents who had strong and loving relationships with their children prior to learning of their sexual orientations, and who worked to maintain this relationship once their children had come-out. One might expect that a parent who has a less affectionate or even strained relationship with a child would experience the disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation by that child in a much different way than the parents who were interviewed for this project. As such, it will be important to take in to consideration the exact nature of the parent/child relationship in question when one attempts to transfer the results of this study onto any specific situation.

Treatment Implications

When taken in their entirety, the process components outlined above act as a sort of blueprint that a child can use to build a more effective, satisfying coming out scenario. Although these components are fairly straightforward and can directly benefit gay and lesbian children who are preparing to come out to their parents, the findings of the current study also offer a number of recommendations for their practical use in the field of counseling. Awareness of these process components may allow counselors to work more effectively with gay and lesbian clients who are preparing to come out to their parents and might also guide the development and implementation of specific interventions to aid in the development of the disclosure moment.

Given that parents in the current study cited the importance of preparation in developing a disclosure scenario, therapists can help children explore the intricacies of the family dynamic in order to aid them in developing anticipatory coping mechanisms as well as responses with which to confront the most likely range of reactions to the disclosure. Therapists can also teach children to effectively utilize assertive non-verbal behaviors in order to underscore the certainty of the message that they are delivering. Another important part of pre-disclosure preparations involves role-playing. Children can role-play both themselves delivering the disclosure and their parents responding to the disclosure while a therapist can role-play the opposite role. This straight-forward technique provides children with valuable practice at honing the wording of the disclosure, builds confidence in their abilities to deliver the disclosure, and allows them to anticipate and respond to various parental responses.

In light of the findings that parents experience a reaction similar to the traditional grief response when a child comes out, providing education about this process to children could be useful in reducing their anxiety towards a response that may be normative. The importance of empathy throughout the disclosure was stressed by the parents in the current study; therefore it might be appropriate for a therapist to teach a client how to effectively use the empathic preface within the disclosure moment. Therapists might also direct children towards parent-oriented resources that they can have on hand at the time of the disclosure, such as PFLAG brochures or books on how to cope when a child comes out to a parent.

Areas for Future Research

As the homosexual community and their struggles for social equality continue to become increasingly visible it will be important for researches in the social sciences to continue to turn their attention on this still all too often overlooked segment of the population. Given that in many situations, gay and lesbian individuals are often required to make the decision about whether or not to come out on a daily basis, this will be an important area for future research consideration; specifically within the context of familial relationships. There is little to no literature on the coming out process from the perspective of the siblings of gay and lesbian individuals, and a complete lack of it when one moves outside of the boundary of the immediate family. Research focusing on the negotiation of the coming out process with siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other family members would be a welcome and much needed addition to the literature.

In addition to the above, more research on the coming out process within the parent/child relationship is needed. Studies focused on the various relational and process components as proposed in the current study would be welcome in providing support for, or clarifying their role in, the coming out process. Given the overwhelmingly positive attitude of the parents in the current study a quantitative study investigating the role of optimism or a positive world-view would help determine if this played a role in moderating parental satisfaction or if it might be better explained by a self-selection bias in the study's methodology.

Another important area for further research involves the disparity between parents' stated levels of satisfaction with their children's disclosures, and their attitudes about the disclosures themselves. Attribution theory was offered as a partial explanation for this phenomenon, but it cannot account for the entire discrepancy primarily because the investigator did not directly ask each parent if they perceived that their child was forced into disclosing or not. Because this perception is one of the central tenants of attribution theory, it cannot be fully relied upon to explain the findings of the current study. Future studies should directly investigate the role of attribution theory in the coming out process from the parental perspective. In addition, follow-up studies should be conducted to determine other factors that may account for the surprising schism described above.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Demographic Information

1. Sex
Male:____
Female:____

2. Age
Current:____
When child “came out”:____
Child’s current age:____
Child’s age at disclosure:____

3. Marital Status
Single:____
Married/Partnered:____
Divorced/Separated:____

4. Ethnicity
Caucasian/White:____
African American/Black:____
Hispanic/Mexican American/Latino:____
Asian:____
Native American:____
Other:_____

5. Education Level
No High School Diploma or GED:____
High School Diploma or GED:____
B.A. or B.S.:____
M.A. or M.S.:____
Ed.D. or Ph.D.:____
Other:_____

6. Religious Affiliation
Not Religiously Affiliated:____
Protestant:____
Catholic:____
Jewish:____
Muslim:____
Budhist:____
Other:_____

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLIER

An Invitation to Participate in Cutting Edge Research

Please consider participating in a study investigating the factors that influence a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation.

-Participation in this study would require that **you provide some demographic information and answer questions in a one-on-one interview.** The questions will deal with the moment your child "came out" to you and your thoughts and feelings about that event. The interview will take between an hour and an hour and one-half to complete and will be conducted either in your home or via telephone for convenience.

-**Your responses will be kept confidential** and stored in a locked file. In addition, you will create pseudonyms for both yourself and your child which will be used throughout the interview process. In this way no responses can be traced back to you.

-**Your participation in this study will not be revealed to your child!!!** Your child's only involvement in this study was to serve as a referral source. Once that referral was made, no further contact will occur between the researcher and your child. **Ever!!!**

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more about this study please read the **Informed Consent Form** on the following pages.

If you have any additional questions or would like to participate, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or his committee chair:

Drew Miller, M.S.
Office: XXX-XXXX
E-Mail: XXXX@XXXX.edu

Dr. Dan Brossart, Ph.D.
Office: XXX-XXXX
E-Mail: XXXX@XXXX.edu

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

DETERMINANTS OF PARENTAL SATISFACTION WITH DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

I understand that I am being asked to participate in dissertation research conducted by Andrew Miller to investigate what factors influence a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation. I understand that the objective of this study is to better understand which factors involved in a child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation to a parent are associated with the parent's satisfaction with this disclosure, and to learn under what circumstances a parent would prefer to have a child's sexual orientation disclosed to him or her. The results would inform counselors working with gay or lesbian clients who are coping with the coming out process understand which factors are the most important to pay attention to, to ensure the most successful disclosure possible.

I understand that I am participating in this study with approximately 11 other parents of gay or lesbian children who are affiliated with Texas A&M University. I understand that once I consent to participate I will arrange a time to meet with Andrew Miller in order to discuss the moment in which my child "came out" to me. The total interview will take approximately one (1) hour to one (1) hour and thirty (30) minutes and will be conducted in my home or via telephone. I understand that additional meetings may be necessary after the initial interview and that Andrew Miller will arrange such appointments with me as necessary.

I understand that the demographic information gathered will be used in this study for the purpose of correlating response patterns in the interview with this information. I understand that this information will be coded with the aforementioned pseudonym and will not be associated with any information related to my true identity.

I understand that any information I provide to Andrew Miller during the course of the interview will be kept confidential. I understand that he and I will agree to a pseudonym for both myself and my child that will be used to track the information I provide to him. I understand that my participation in this research and the content of my interviews will not be shared with my child. I understand that my interviews must be audio taped for the purpose of ensuring accurate transcriptions, and consent to allow such audio taping to take place. I understand that the audio tapes will be labeled with the aforementioned pseudonym and that both my child and I will be referred to by our respective pseudonyms for the duration of audio taping. I further understand that the audio tapes will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet in a private office in Harrington Tower on the campus of Texas A&M University, may be retained for up to 2 years after the recording and will be erased after that time. I understand that Andrew Miller, his

Graduate Committee Chair (Dr. Dan Brossart) and research assistant will have access to these tape recordings.

I understand that the risks of participating in this study are minimal. There is a small chance that reflecting on and answering some of the questions could make me feel anxious or uncomfortable.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, I can contact the Institutional Review Board through Dr. Michael W. Buckley, Director of Research Compliance, Office of Vice President for Research at (xxx) xxx-xxxx (xxxx@xxx.edu).

I have read and understand the explanations provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I am voluntarily participating in this study. I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. I further understand that if I decide to participate I am free to refuse to answer any of the questions that may make me feel uncomfortable. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

If at any time I have questions about this research study, I should feel free to contact Andrew Miller or his advisor, Dr. Dan Brossart, at:

Dr. Dan Brossart, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Psychology
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77845-4225
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
xxx@xxx.edu

Andrew Miller, M.S.
Department of Educational Psychology
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77845-4225
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
xxx@xxx.edu

By signing this document, I consent to participating in this study:

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX D

LETTER OF ATTESTATION

April 20, 2005

This letter is to attest to the data audit work on the dissertation by Andrew Miller, entitled *Determinants of Parental Satisfaction With a Child's Disclosure of Sexual Orientation*."

I am a 4th year doctoral candidate in the School Psychology doctoral that is housed within the College of Education's Educational Psychology Program at Texas A&M University. I have an active interest in issues related to diversity, particularly within the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgendered community, and have not only sought out additional diversity-related training but have served on the governance committee for the American Psychological Association for Graduate Students as the Member at Large Diversity Focus. I also have extensive training in child and family therapy. Based upon this background I believe that I have the expertise needed to understand the population used in the current study and the issues that are unique to them, which in turn allows me to serve as the auditor of this project. Based on this role, I was able not only to establish the trustworthiness of the results, but was also able to assist Andrew in the analysis and understanding of the information that emerged within the results.

As auditor of the data and analysis, I reviewed categorizations of the units and the definition of the categories with Andrew during two telephone conferences. As a part of this process, I reviewed each transcribed unit for goodness of fit with the assigned category and associated definition. During this process I was able to work with Andrew on refining some of the categories and combined categories on one occasion to create greater heterogeneity of categories. Moreover, I assisted Andrew in developing his understanding of what the themes may mean for the area he investigated.

In reviewing Andrew's organization of the data and supporting information, I found that the identified themes may be easily linked to the individual pieces of data units that serve as the foundation of the framework that emerged from the results. The information was well organize and easily accessible.

I believe that Andrew has met the requirements necessary for me to determine that these results are trustworthy and amenable to interpretation and application to other similar contexts.

Sincerely,

Susan E. D'Esposito

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Prior to the disclosure, what was your relationship with _____ like?
2. Did you ever suspect that _____ was _____ before he/she told you?
3. What was happening just before _____ came out to you?
4. How did _____ come out to you?
5. What happened immediately after _____ came out to you?
6. At the moment _____ came out, what do you remember thinking? Feeling?
7. What's your most vivid memory from that time?
8. Overall, how did you feel about the way that _____ came out to you?
9. When _____ came out, what are some things that made the news easier to hear?
10. What are some things that made the news harder to hear?
11. If you could have created the most ideal scenario in which _____ came out to you, how would it have gone?

APPENDIX F

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How does a parent's pre-disclosure relationship with a child influence his/her reaction to the disclosure/satisfaction with the disclosure?

CATEGORIES

1. The parent discusses the specific nature of the parent/child relationship.
2. The parent describes specific qualities or behaviors associated with the child.
3. The parent states whether or not he or she perceived a child to be gay or lesbian prior to the disclosure.
4. The parent discusses the impact that the early perception of a child's sexuality or lack thereof had on his or her reaction to the actual disclosure.
5. The parent discloses reasons why he or she never considered that a child was gay or lesbian.
6. The parent mentions reasons why a child was perceived to be gay or lesbian.

APPENDIX G

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news easier to hear or made the news more acceptable?

CATEGORIES

1. The parent discusses any indicators that important information was about to be shared.
2. The parent describes any element of the disclosure that may have made the news easier to hear.
3. The parent discusses the child's decision to share the news with one vs. two parents.
4. The parent discusses any previous encounters with gay or lesbian individuals.

APPENDIX H

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 3

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news more difficult to hear or made the news more unacceptable?

CATEGORIES

1. Parent discusses concerns for a child's wellbeing based on his or her sexuality.
2. The parent discusses any element of the disclosure that may have made the news harder to hear.
3. The parent discusses concerns regarding any impact parenting might have had on the child's sexual orientation.

APPENDIX I

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 4

How does a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of sexual orientation change over time?

CATEGORIES

1. The parent describes his or her level of satisfaction with the disclosure.
2. The parent discusses any changes in the perception of a child's sexual orientation, or the disclosure itself, since the disclosure occurred.

APPENDIX J

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 5

What is the “ideal” scenario in which a parent would prefer to have his or her child’s sexual orientation disclosed?

CATEGORIES

1. The parent describes any changes that he or she would make to the coming out scenario.
2. The parent shares advice for children who are preparing to come out.
3. The parent discusses thoughts about the child's age at disclosure.

APPENDIX K

CATEGORIES FOR RESEARCH RELATED THEME

What does a parent experience as a child discloses his or her sexual orientation?

CATEGORIES

1. The parent describes the events that immediately preceded the disclosure.
2. The parent states the exact wording that a child used to disclose his or her sexuality.
4. The parent describes what happened immediately following the disclosure.
5. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were either behavioral or physical in nature.
6. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were emotional in nature.
7. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were cognitive in nature.
8. The parent discusses the child's response to the parent's reaction to the disclosure.
9. The parent describes his or her most vivid memory from the disclosure moment.

APPENDIX L

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How does a parent's pre-disclosure relationship with a child influence his/her reaction to the disclosure/satisfaction with the disclosure?

1. The parent discusses the specific nature of the parent/child relationship.

Grace:

We've had a very excellent relationship.

Grace:

He never had to be prodded, never had to be coaxed, always did kind of everything right, so we had a very good relationship.

Steven:

He and I had a very, very good relationship.

Steven:

It was probably not what I had anticipated as a father, in terms of a father/son relationship, but that was not a problem either.

Steven:

He was very into science-fiction/fantasy kinds of literature early on, so we spent a fair amount talking about things that typically fathers and sons wouldn't talk about until high-school or college even, because he was very much interested in science

Diana:

And we were very close.

Diana:

I really feel like we had a good relationship.

Diana:

It was wonderful.

Greg:

It was very good prior.

Greg:

So I think we had a good relationship, and I really enjoyed having him around the whole time he grew up.

Carol:

Pretty close.

Judy:

I think it's pretty good.

Judy:

So that was hard for me, but I think our relationship was somewhat close because she would cry with me.

Judy:

I think it's pretty good. She's sort of been entering teenage time, so that's always a little more difficult because they're not as close to their mothers. They kind of want to step away. So we're always...I feel like most of the time we're open but as she was, she was starting to approach being a teenager so she wasn't talking to me as much.

Judy:

Maybe in a way our relationship has been getting a little harder.

Tom:

I have a close relationship with my daughter.

Tom:

You know, moms always tend to parent more than dads but I feel like I'm a really involved dad. Supportive, and really aware of stuff that's going on in her life. Live and die with her ups and downs in life...stuff like that.

Tom:

And I've never had another kid so I can't compare it with anything, but she's the most important thing in my life.

Sarah:

Well we've always been close. I think I always felt that he and I were closer than he and his father were.

Sarah:

So we were close.

Holly:

Very close...always has been, with her and her sister both.

Holly:

Really good. Really good. Yeah. Always has been. I don't know if we've even had a fight.

Linda:

We've always done lots of things together. Probably more than lots of teenage mothers and daughters. We have had very few fights and personality wise we're very much alike so that's probably helped.

Karen:

Nichole and I were always very, very close. Not only as mother and daughter but also as friends.

2. The parent describes specific qualities or behaviors associated with the child.

Grace:

But he was just excellent, an excellent student.

Grace:

That he set goals and then everything seemed to be geared towards success...being the best.

Grace:

You know Brian was so perfect, and I hate to use that, but everything...and he did date.

Steven:

You know Brian was very bright and loved to read, and we talked a lot about things that he was reading..

Steven:

And he was a, Brian's always been the kind of young person who would run onto a problem, figure out the solution and then come and ponder on two or three potential courses of action, which was just fine.

Steven:

Above all things he makes intelligent, rational decisions.

Diana:

That I didn't know how it was because he always did well in school, he played the piano beautifully, he always behaved, he was respectful.

Diana:

He was the perfect child.

Diana:

I should have known something was wrong I guess, because he wasn't, we didn't go through the typical problems with teenagers and boys, being rude to their mothers, you know.

Diana:

The kid was, and is still, incredible.

Greg:

He was a, none of the teenage things that you hear other parents complain about.

Greg:

He was always a relatively easy child. Nothing bad at all.

Greg:

All three kids have been good and Scott has been particularly good.

Carol:

Typical only child, because he was seven years younger than the youngest of the top four.

Judy:

She's never been...and I knew this...she's not a typical girl. I mean I knew this...not into makeup or looking good, all those kinds of things.

Judy:

She was always trying to be a little different than the typical girl.

Sarah:

He had some problems in high-school, some emotional problems, he went into a psychiatric facility, I hate to call it that, but that's what it was.

Sarah:

He had a couple of good close friends, but not a lot, and he graduated just fine...on time.

Sarah:

He never liked sports, which disappointed his dad, cause his dad was big into baseball when he was a kid, and he just didn't...so looking forward to being a coach when he was little, so he was really disappointed over that.

Sarah:

She was always very outgoing.

Sarah:

Where Brent was very inward she was very outward.

Sarah:

And she would just come home and want to tell us everything where Brent never did.

Holly:

She was a very happy well-adjusted kid. Never was in trouble at school or angry about anything. A kid you can be very proud of.

Linda:

She was a good student and did lots of activities.

3. The parent states whether or not he or she perceived a child to be gay or lesbian prior to the disclosure.

Grace:

I didn't but Steven did.

Grace:

I remember the day he said to me, and again Brian was a Jr. in high school, "I would not be surprised if Brian's not gay."

Steven:

Well, that's kind of a, it's a difficult one for me to answer, because in truth I have felt that Brian was probably gay since he was three or four years old.

Diana:

There was one time that it crossed my mind.

Diana:

It was the only time we ever wondered. It was more like "You don't really think he is do you?" And it was like "No."

Greg:

Yeah. He always went to the proms and all of the high-school social events. He had one particular girl-friend who he was always close to, but you never sensed that it was really that hot or anything. So I guess it did cross my mind a couple of times.

Greg:

Again, he didn't do overt that actually brought it to the forefront, but again, it's always in the back of a man's...I think in a man's mind, I can't obviously speak for a mother.

Greg:

He, I remember lying in bed some nights and wondering, "I just wonder if he's gay."

Carol:

Looking back there were a couple of times that I wondered about things.

Carol:

Behavior more than anything.

Judy:

I don't know if it was before she was born or while I was pregnant with her. I had, and I don't know, but I believe in all of these things, I had a very strong intuition that she was going to be gay.

Judy:

But maybe I was just thinking as I was carrying her, I don't know why, I just thought "If she's gay she's born to the right parents."

Judy:

But I had this strong intuition that she was going to be gay.

Sarah:

Not at all.

Sarah:

No, and even knowing now and looking back I don't see it.

Holly:

So I used to wonder, "Hmmm. Something's not quite right here." So that was the big thing that I picked up on.

Holly:

Her whole life though she was never interested in boyfriend or boys. I mean, she thought they were fine, she had three brothers.

Linda:

And I told her that her dad and I had talked about it and we thought so.

Linda:

I kept asking her "Are you sure you're not gay?"

Karen:

No.

4. The parent discusses the impact that the early perception of a child's sexuality or lack thereof had on his or her reaction to the actual disclosure.

Grace:

I don't recall that I even responded, but in retrospect I've said over and over how glad I was that at least that was planted.

Grace:

I still didn't expect it, but I think that because of that it wasn't just a total surprise.

Steven:

It was not a great revelation; it was not a great surprise to me.

Steven:

But you're really more focused on who the individual is and what seems to be right for that person than "Oh my God, my son may be gay." And, you know, it frankly didn't, it didn't cause me any great anxiety or whatever to have that perception.

Diana:

I was completely blindsided.

Carol:

I was very surprised.

Sarah:

And when he told me I wasn't surprised.

Sarah:

Oh, I was totally devastated.

5. The parent discloses reasons why he or she never considered that a child was gay or lesbian.

Grace:

In fact he had girlfriend in high school.

Grace:

But he had a girlfriend in high school and again, it just wasn't one of those things that was just ever in my realization that that was even possible. And not even something that I even thought about.

Grace:

When Brian was finishing his Sr. year in college he called us and told us that he needed to, he thought he needed some counseling help...But even then it didn't...I just thought it was just the stress in having pushed always so hard and always having achieved his goals and that sort of thing and all of a sudden it's just become too much.

Steven:

It was probably, it was partially because he was so straight in so many ways...such a good student and very civic minded, and a really loving and caring child; the kind everybody hopes you have.

Diana:

He had a girlfriend in high-school, and I loved her.

Diana:

And he had a girlfriend, he loved to dance, he still does.

Diana:

So why would I suspect...and he's so serious and so focused on his career and going to med-school and all this that he's totally...and I just figured he's so mature that it is disgusting, and he doesn't want to get involved with anybody too soon.

Greg:

I don't know the correct terms to use, so I'm sorry...he's not a flamer, or anything like that.

Greg:

He always went to the proms and all of the high-school social events.

Sarah:

He had a girlfriend in middle school, and when he was in his first year of college he had a girlfriend there that he met at work, he had a part-time job, and I think maybe I never really formed it in my mind with a definite word for it.

Sarah:

And his counselor at the time, his therapist, had told us that he thought he probably had some homosexual tendencies. To tell you the truth, that didn't surprise me, but it didn't bother me either.

Sarah:

But it was just, I don't know...a mother's feeling I guess.

Sarah:

No, she had a boyfriend in high school. Two or three probably.

Holly:

Well looking back at the time we talk a lot about...Gwen's a real girly girl, her favorite color is pink, she always fixer her hair, so she's not like she would have suspected.

Holly:

And she's real girly and likes it that way.

Karen:

She did the usual things a girl does.

Karen:

But no, I really wouldn't say there was anything at all.

6. The parent mentions reasons why a child was perceived to be gay or lesbian.

Steven:

Part of it was his development of coordination.

Steven:

But when he through a ball, it was obvious that he had a different muscular-skeletal kind of arrangement or at least the way his muscle structure was developing his coordination was different from what you would see in most little boys. The kinds of things that he like to do, and we used to laugh about him having a washing machine fetish. His very favorite thing in the world was to be involved in doing the laundry.

Steven:

You know, he responded to situations differently, and what at least my perception was that little boys, the way little boys responded to things.

Steven:

He was more in tune to the feelings of other people and more apt to respond to those things.

Steven:

You know I'm not sure there was any one thing, but just a whole pattern of things.

Steven:

It has always been easy for me to identify young people who are gay or lesbian, especially gay.

Diana:

He had a friend over, he wasn't a real close friend, and I didn't know the boy that well, and they had gone up to his room for a few minutes. Scott is more of a type to sit in the kitchen and talk, and his friends, he had the biggest group of friends and they always

hung around...he hardly ever went to his room with anybody, and I remember wondering, because the kid was staying awfully late. So I went upstairs and Scott had a loft in his bedroom, you know above like the sitting area, and they were up there, and that really was odd. And I remember my heart just started pounding, and I don't know what I was worried about, but I just said "Scott" and he just said "We're talking." And I just remember thinking that that was weird.

Diana:

My brother on the other hand, who does not know yet, was constantly worried about it and was always saying, "Get the kid out there. Rough him up."

Diana:

He thought he was just too, polite, too sweet.

Greg:

But in the back of your mind there's always this fear that "My God, I hope that isn't my son or daughter some day and I hope I'm not his or her parent." It's just, I think, part of the culture.

Greg:

Again, he didn't do overt that actually brought it to the forefront, but again, it's always in the back of a man's...I think in a man's mind, I can't obviously speak for a mother.

Judy:

And she said something like "What's love" or something. And we both said, my husband I, "Well you're really going to love a man or you're really going to love a woman. It doesn't matter, but whoever you're going to love is going to be somebody." I remember trying to raise her consciously that it could be either way, that we didn't know, that it's not right or wrong, it's just whoever you happen to love and not if they're a man or a woman.

Judy:

And then as she grew more and more, and by the end of elementary school I finally got her into jeans and she started...and she cut her hair really short and people would think she was a boy.

Tom:

So um, we've raised our daughter to say, you're a kid but as an adult there are all sorts of choices and all sorts of paths and being a lesbian is one of the paths and...the Indigo Girls have always...they sort of introduced me to the lesbian world, and now she's getting her own taste in music but she always follows my cues for taste in music, and I was a huge Indigo Girls fan and so they've always been around and she's gone to their concerts and been with all of the throbbing dykes.

Tom:

So it's never been a big deal and she's always sort of had a cultural affinity to that, and the other thing that made me think was that she's had like three different friendships with girls end really badly and it's almost like...with misunderstandings or with blaming each other, and it's almost been like they've had the intensity of breakups and she's grieved. So it's almost been like a romantic break up, one was at nine and then eleven and twelve or whatever, but she's basically been dumped and she's just really taken it hard. It's almost like the bond; the friendships that she's had were very, very deep with other females.

Sarah:

And his counselor at the time, his therapist, had told us that he thought he probably had some homosexual tendencies. To tell you the truth, that didn't surprise me, but it didn't bother me either.

Sarah:

But it was just, I don't know, a mother's feeling I guess.

Holly:

But she had guys constantly asking her out on dates, and she would go out on a date only when it would benefit her. If she wanted to go to the Homecoming Dance or Prom she would go out with that guy one time and never speak with him again. And I kind of worried why she was doing that and she never really could tell me why...if she didn't like him or he was a jerk, so that was a little bit of a hint looking back.

Holly:

Like both my brothers are gay, and she's crazy about her uncles and wanted to talk to them a lot and was real close to them when they came to visit...one lives in LA and one lives in San Antonio. So she was always interested in their lives and, so I think...and her favorite show is "Queer as Folk."

Holly:

She wore no make up and real big old huge baggy clothes and I just thought that she was into that look right now.

Linda:

I don't know, I guess I have a gay-dar.

Linda:

There were all of these beautiful boys who were after her and she had no interest in them. I went "Why isn't she going out with that one. He's so cute."

Linda:

In junior high she was interested a little bit in guys then after that she wasn't and she went to a few dances but at the prom she went with another girl but it was like she was the vice-president and the other girl was the president of student council, so it was pretty covert if they went romantically. All of their friends are gay too.

APPENDIX M

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news easier to hear or made the news more acceptable?

1. The parent discusses any indicators that important information was about to be shared.

Grace:

I think Steven knew what was coming.

Grace:

I think he sensed from the evening what Brian was.

Grace:

Not at all.

Steven:

I frankly was caught totally off guard.

Steven:

He would always fix dinner or he would do something, but his selection of that time, that place, that moment, I didn't frankly have a clue that that was going to happen. There was nothing really leading up to that, at least that I was aware of.

Steven:

And then we sat down, and dinner was pretty normal, except for the fact that he was really pushing wine.

Steven:

And frankly, we'd all had two or three glass of wine at that point, so we're all pretty comfortable and he sat down on the couch right where you're setting and, something which he almost never did, he tucked his legs up in under him. And that was sort of a clue that something different was coming.

Steven:

But I couldn't say that I had really anticipated this with that time, that place.

Steven:

And I was again surprised that I had didn't realize that this was really a set up.

Diana:

And he came in to get a tray or a fork or something, and he said “Scott wants to talk to us after dinner, just us.”

Greg:

I have something I’d like to tell you.” And I remember at the time, I think that was when I remember thinking “I bet I know what this is.”

Greg:

Yeah, and his body language and the way he sort of just blurted it out, he was nervous. That wasn’t a normal request, like he wrecked the car or something. There was definitely something on his mind.

Greg:

I remember I had a sense of foreboding. And I remember it did cross my mind. “I wonder if he’s going to say that he’s gay.”

Greg:

Personally I would much rather have had that because I think it allowed me to be prepared. Because I think as the evening wore on while we were eating, I think it was becoming more obvious to me that “Yep, I think I know what he’s going to tell me.” It allowed me to prepare.

Greg:

I remember thinking “That is the worst thing he can tell me, and nothing else can be as bad as that.” So it allowed me to prepare. It was bad news, but I had time to prepare. I’m glad he did it.

Carol:

No. And that was probably because we frequently had late evening talks.

Holly:

And we got in and she was kind of trembling, her hand, and I was like “Gwen are you okay?” and she said “I’m fine mom.”

Linda:

I kept asking her “Are you sure you’re not gay?”

Linda:

I don’t know, I guess I have a gaydar.

2. The parent describes any element of the disclosure that may have made the news easier to hear.

Grace:

And for that reason I was glad that hopefully he had reached that acceptance or whatever and was ready to go on with his life and decide where he was going to go from there.

Grace:

So I think he had done everything the right way, as far as I could tell, to make sure that he knew what he was.

Grace:

And I guess that's why I was so comfortable in a way with Brian telling us at that point in time, because again I know he struggled with it. I know he tried to either make certain or whatever. And after, and again, I've seen him develop and I've seen him...he's bright and articulate and all of those things and I knew it was okay. I felt comfortable that he knew. And if he knew then I in turn had to be able to accept that.

Steven:

Well, again, I think that I may have suspected that for a long, long time. The other thing is that I had...within the three or four months prior to this, I had dealt with a couple of student leaders in the _____ who were gay.

Steven:

So I've been through a number of circumstances within that year, and seen varieties of ways that kids choose to come out and a variety of reactions on the part of families. So that sort of, it's not, it's not something I deal with every day, but it's not unusual for me either.

Diana:

And it was very impressive how well he handled himself and how calm he was and how reassuring.

Greg:

He wasn't flaunting it.

Greg:

Because I didn't want to be angry at him because he was suffering with us. It almost would have been cruel to strike out at him. So I think that actually, I'm glad I cried instead of got angry. And I think his attitude and his demeanor actually helped me to do that.

Greg:

It's interesting, he let us eat dinner first. We probably wouldn't have been able to eat. His preparedness, his saying what it was, and then he listened. He listened a lot. And when I said "What parent would tale their son or daughter to a gay doctor" he just sort of nodded. He didn't get angry, he didn't fight back.

Greg:

But it was just "I'm going to get it out and I'm just gonna sit here and absorb everything that comes back to me.

Greg:

And I remember the next morning, we all went to bed and of course we didn't sleep to well, and I got up at seven in the morning and said "Okay, let's go back outside and talk about this" and he said "Okay."

Greg:

So, he didn't say, you know "When is this going to end" or "Let me shower first" or something like that.

Carol:

Well...he had already told his sister.

Judy:

But I think it's good to do it in a familiar place that you're both comfortable in.

Judy:

But yeah, I think being at home was really the most helpful.

Judy:

It just sort of happened naturally.

Judy:

I liked the fact that it was just the two of us. I liked the fact that she initiated it, or told me about it. I liked that, I was in a good mood, or a good space and she seemed to be in a good space...we're sharing.

Judy:

Not just taking your mom and saying "Mom, I've got something to tell you." It was nice that it wasn't like I was set up.

Tom:

Number one, I knew in advance.

Sarah:

But like I said he had the pamphlets and he told me where I could go to get some counseling or some support groups, so yeah, I thought he did a good job.

Sarah:

No. And I'm sure she didn't mean to do it that way.

Holly:

Well she said "I've been struggling with this for two years and that's why I've been so depressed and unhappy and I saw a counselor at Tech and I've read a book on the subject and I've done lots of research on it. I've thought about it." And she described to me that her growth of two years. She told me about how she'd gone out with all the lesbians, that she went out with them two or three times. And she said "You know, that was my last ditch effort to see if I was straight or not, and I knew I'm not." So she really just talked to me about her journey.

Holly:

Right, because it wasn't...she said it was something she'd struggled with for a while and thought about a lot.

Holly:

She was very, very firm though.

Linda:

I think what made it easier, because I was so relieved to know, it was not anything specific about the content, it was just the um....

Drew: The general knowing?

Linda: Yeah.

Karen:

I think a real strong positive was that she was very open. I had a lot of questions. She answered them. If there wasn't an answer she knew she offered to get back to me and she did.

Karen:

Willing to answer questions, whatever I had to help me to understand her.

3. The parent discusses the child's decision to share the news with one vs. two parents.

Grace:

No, I think it had to be that way for our family. Because we all are very close.

Grace:

And in retrospect it's kind of interesting because he must have sort have felt comfortable unless he thought that I would be a pacifier in that regard. And maybe he thought, I don't know, maybe he thought I would take it the hardest and Steven would be there to offer comfort.

Grace:

He had a really good scholarship to come here and there was a lot of folks that had the expectation that he would come here, and it got down to absolutely the final deadline that he had to make the decision and we all came right here in the living room and we said "It's your decision, we're not putting any pressure on you, but you've got to make it."

Grace:

So I think a lot of times we did things that way.

Diana:

But I think that, once again it was out of respect and I think he knew that he needed to do it that way. I think it was better to tell us both.

Greg:

And I think he planned that out. He knew his mother would be more sympathetic. And I don't know, I've never asked him if he thought I might just punch him out or throw him out or walk out or something like that. So I think he did the right thing and personally, if he would have told me separately I would have come unglued. I would have said "Well now we have to get your mom in here." So really, I'm glad he did it together because we kept each other under control.

Greg:

It would have been a lot harder for me if he would have told me one on one.

Carol:

Oh I think it was for the best that we were by ourselves. Or at least that I was.

Carol:

Because I only had to deal with my feelings. I didn't have to deal with my husbands at the time.

Carol:

Yeah, I think all my kids were that way.

Carol:

"If we can get it by mom then we can probably get by dad."

Tom:

I think it was probably more...I think it just came up in the conversation with my wife and her, and I think one on one is better because it's less...person to person instead of a kid and their parents, it's like me against them. I think telling one on one, and obviously she trusted my wife more than me with that information and that was okay and I think that the information was transmitted fine.

Sarah:

No. I think that's okay. I think it worked out better that way.

Linda:

Um...no. My husband the last four years of his life...he had a heart-attack and we think that he was having a lot of brain injury from that. So he wasn't very pleasant to be around. If he had been himself then yes. I'm just afraid that as he was he might have blurted out something like that.

4. The parent discusses any previous encounters with gay or lesbian individuals.

Steven:

The other thing is that I had...within the three or four months prior to this, I had dealt with a couple of student leaders in the _____ who were gay.

Steven:

So I've been through a number of circumstances within that year, and seen varieties of ways that kids choose to come out and a variety of reactions on the part of families. So that sort of, it's not, it's not something I deal with every day, but it's not unusual for me either.

Diana:

My husband told me after the fact that my boss who I worked for, for three years, twenty something years ago, was gay. And I said "He was not" and he said "He was too." I had no idea he was either because I didn't know enough to know it. I didn't recognize it.

Diana:

But I didn't know enough to know and my husband can't believe I was that naïve.

Carol:

Not any at all except a couple of work situations where there was someone that was, once in _____ working for the V.A...I believe there were two people there who I knew that were gay. One was a nice guy, just a regular guy, and the other one was the painted fingernails, very...you know what I'm talking about.

Carol:

Very, very different.

Judy:

And I really had no contact with anyone gay as I grew up, although in my family my uncle, I guess it was kind of thought that he was gay, but he never came out at all.

Judy:

But then my husband and I coming up to Oregon, it was actually the first time I really got involved with gay women. And I just got more and more involved. And I led a group, and a person I became friends with, she was gay, I was straight, and we called it the lesbian/non-lesbian group.

Judy:

And I got to know some of these stereotypes and it was just wonderful.

Tom:

Well, number one we raised her...we have gay friends, and my oldest sister is a lesbian and, which is really funny because she's never come out to me, ever.

Tom:

And a couple of our friends were the first women in _____ to get married.

Sarah:

No. There was one guy in my office that we kind of thought was...and for no reason.

Sarah:

It didn't define what kind of person he was.

Holly:

Like I said I had lots of experience with gay guys, both of my brothers are gay and they're partnered.

Holly:

Oh, absolutely. I've seen what they've been through their whole lives.

Linda:

I have a lot of friends that are gay.

Linda:

And I told him I didn't think so because I have a really good friend who's a psychiatrist who's kind of like Kathy in that she's gay but it doesn't just slap you in the face. She's just normal, not fem but not real dykie. Just a real normal kind of person.

Karen:

But I grew in the San Francisco Bay area near Berkeley and am used to seeing a lot of gay people, so was probably much more receptive than my husband, and my whole family in

California was also very receptive and I think it's because of where I was born and raised and lived as a kid.

Karen:

They were people that you saw passing on the street, and my mom's Norwegian and one of the reception people at the church was gay and I knew _____ very well. I know someone tried to pick me up once, that was scary at sixteen.

Karen:

I think only it the respect it bothered me that now this was something I would have to face as a parent and something that was going to be really hard for her, something that I would have to be very strongly supportive of.

APPENDIX N

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 3

In the moment, what aspects of a child's disclosure of sexual orientation made the news more difficult to hear or made the news more unacceptable?

1. Parent discusses concerns for a child's wellbeing based on his or her sexuality.

Grace:

I guess it's because that I sensed that probably the life for a gay or lesbian must be much more challenging because of attitudes and especially in the state of Texas or in the south than what a heterosexual encountered. And that...I really worried about that. Concern for him, and concerned that he would find happiness I think...that he would be able to have a life.

Grace:

You know, "Are you sure?" or I don't know, at that point in time Brian had been, had a commitment to the United States Navy, and that was another issue. Fortunately, he was in the Clinton era, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", but that was another thing I was very concerned about.

Steven:

And my God, the last group of people in our society that's going to receive the brunt of our need as a species to hate or look down on someone is probably going to be the gays and lesbians and I sure wish I could take that burden off of him." But you can't.

Steven:

And I think I said something about that I was concerned about his future relationships because he was always been very much involved in the family and very committed to family, and this was going to mean that his family was a little different.

Steven:

My biggest concern at this point is that life is hard enough without having to deal with something above and beyond what most of the rest of us have to deal with.

Steven:

Just concern that life is tough enough without having to be in that last group out there that society seems to feel is okay to hurt.

Greg:

And also, probably before he said anything, secondarily is "Oh my gosh, what's this going to mean for him?."

Carol:

Because you always hear about bad things happening to gay young men, and I was always terrified of something happening to him.

Carol:

And not on the AIDS type things, but more being assaulted or something.

Judy:

“Oh my God, this means her life is going to be a little bit harder.”

Holly:

It's the same thing if you have an interracial relationship. It's like “Oh my God. Do you realize what you're going to have to face?” There's that scary part of it. So that's why I was scared for her.

Holly:

And she's told me a lot of stories about hanging out in _____ and in lots of places where lesbians, gay men are discriminated against and even hurt physically. So I was scared.

Holly:

I mean, both of my brothers are gay, I've never tried to hide that, it wasn't that, it was more like “Oh gosh, this is going to be hard.” I worry about her.

Linda:

And there's always just a little of “Oh no. Your life is going to be harder.” With some of the conservative far right-wing kind of people.

Linda:

A little bit harder road. A little bit harder life.

Karen:

I think that one of my main concerns was...she had a friend who had a rainbow sticker on the back of her car and she was stopped at a traffic light in _____ and someone got out of a pick-up truck, and _____ had her window down, and came in with his fist and just let her have it.

Karen:

And I think my main thing is, here, for her, somebody looking at her as a category and not looking at her as the same loving young woman that she was before.

Karen:

I asked her that when she went out with her girlfriend that she not display affection in public, because I did not want people coming up and jumping her.

Karen:

And the way people just blank categorize people as these bad people, and they're not giving them a chance.

Karen:

And I think a lot of it, the people aren't willing to understand or take the time to understand that these are people first and they're like everybody else...the only difference is their sexual orientation, and that's it.

2. The parent discusses any element of the disclosure that may have made the news harder to hear.

Grace:

I don't see how he could have done it any...you know it was hard to hear but I don't know how he could have said it any more gently than what he did.

Steven:

But, I don't think that there was anything that he did that could have made it gone any better.

Diana:

I don't think he said anything that made it harder. I think it was just hard to swallow, because we just had big hopes for an easier, normal situation. I mean easier, the traditional situation.

Greg:

You know, I really can't think of anything.

Greg:

So, but personally I would have been much happier with the three of us being in a totally private situation.

Judy:

I don't think so.

Tom:

I guess I was a little put off that she had to be forced or prompted to tell me. I think if it came out of the blue from her to me I might have been even more positive.

Tom:

Um, I'm a little disappointed that she didn't do it on her own to me, that she was prompted.

Sarah:

Hearing it over the phone. And she was upset because of what I was thinking. And I was upset by that, but I was more upset by what she said. No, that's not a recommended method.

Holly:

Well, she said she didn't want to tell my parents. And I asked her if she wanted her step-brothers to know because they were all there at that time and she said she didn't care. But that bothered me because I hated that we had to start out hiding things and in our society that we have to hide it, so that bothered me.

Linda:

And I guess the thing on the flip side is that there's just a part of me that wanted her to be more honest with me. But she just said she wasn't ready to tell me and she probably had talked about it to her friends like, as a done deal, like "I am gay, what am I going to tell them?" I think, she told me later that just being unsure, it was a hard decision. Not decision, it's not really a decision but just to tell me is a decision. Because she knew that I wasn't going to reject her or be ugly or anything.

Karen:

I think it's really obvious because the major thing was having me be a week or so at home first before coming to me.

3. The parent discusses concerns regarding any impact parenting might have had on the child's sexual orientation.

Grace:

Because I think, I don't know, and I don't believe this now at all, but it's sort of that thing about "Did I, was the way I raised Brian, did I keep him to clean when he was little, did I not let him get dirty, did I not let him play roughhouse or whatever." Was there something in his childhood upbringing that affected or....you just don't know.

Diana:

My husband was like "Were we too strict on you. Were we too protective?" Yes we were probably.

Greg:

And to be honest with you sense then I've always wondered, like I said we've always had a more intellectual relationship, you know "Well, I wonder if I should have played sports with him more." Or maybe been a little more physical; roughhousing and stuff.

Greg:

I remember talking to Diana that night, and it still crosses my mind to this day, that if I had been a more quote unquote father to him, hunting, fishing, sports, you know, throwing each other into the walls and stuff like that, I just wonder if that would have made a difference.

Greg:

“I wonder if I could have done something.” Maybe he was right on the border and I could have pushed him to be quote unquote normal. And I had a tremendous sense of guilt for quite a long time after that, and it still crosses my mind.

Holly:

And I was like “It’s because I divorced your dad. It’s because I haven’t been a good mother” and she started laughing.

Holly:

So that was my first reaction and my reaction for a long time after was that it was my fault.

Holly:

I was convinced. It wasn’t wondering. I was convinced it was my fault. That I had not been a good role-model or I had not been a good mother or the fact that her father had left us when she was little. My mother immediately blamed him, but she’s really stupid. And then, you have to look, there’s got to be some genetic component if both of my brother’s are gay, there really is. So we talked about that a little bit. And we had lots more to talk about after that but that was about it. I started laughing then because she started teasing me, saying “I don’t know. What else could be your fault mom? What else can we come up with?”

APPENDIX O

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 4

How does a parent's satisfaction with a child's disclosure of sexual orientation change over time?

1. The parent describes his or her level of satisfaction with the disclosure.

Grace:

For us to have heard, or, I think it was just a much kinder, thoughtful...I guess thoughtful way for Brian to be sensitive to our feelings and have a situation where we could...it wasn't just letting us know, but so that we could talk about it and discuss it with him.

Steven:

I think that was good. It was a wonderful dinner, two kinds of wine, nice music, creating an environment. So, you know, one of the things that he was living out there...all of our major family conferences have been around here. If his sister was in trouble about something or if he had a problem or a concern, we always came together as a family right here in this exact spot. We even all have our own little places that we, that we would take up.

Steven:

There was a beautiful environment, with lots of ambiance.

Diana:

I thought it was fine. I think it was a pretty hard thing to do, and I thought it took a lot of courage.

Diana:

We could have made it harder on him than we did, and nothing changed for us.

Diana:

I felt almost complimented that he was secure enough in our love that he knew he was okay.

Greg:

I'm very impressed with how he planned it. I was very impressed that he didn't beat around the bush. I was very impressed with he was prepared for anything.

Greg:

I remember, I think he prepared us. I'm glad he did it that way.

Greg:

And I'm glad he didn't flaunt it. I'm glad it wasn't "Get over it."

Greg:

He was very empathetic to what we were going through.

Carol:

I don't think it could have been any different. I think that's just the way he would have told me he was going to get married or if he was going to join the Army or if he was gonna do anything of a serious nature.

Judy:

Um, I feel very good about it. It was a private personal moment. It was at home. I thought it was...it was a nice way to do it.

Judy:

I guess, I don't know, because it seemed like it was fine the way it happened.

Tom:

Um, I'm a little disappointed that she didn't do it on her own to me, that she was prompted.

Tom:

I wish she would have told me on her own, but I never prompted her after...it's just sort of her business I guess, but I'm glad she told me.

Tom:

I just can't think of a better scenario. It just...I think it was fine.

Sarah:

I think that he did it fine. Not for the right reasons because of the phone bill.

Holly:

I thought it was very gentle and kind, and the thing that I remember about it the most was that she was more worried about me than she was about her.

Holly:

I really was fine with it. I think I would have liked for her to have told me before she told her dad. But, and I joked with her about last time she was here about that, and she said "Well he drug it out of me!" But that's fine.

Holly:

I really thought that she put a lot of thought into it and into the way she told me and it was safe and I could cry and we were both in control and laughing when we got there.

Linda:

It was fine. I think it was a real typical thing to learn about your kid about anything when they're 18 and they want to be themselves.

2. The parent discusses any changes in the perception of a child's sexual orientation, or the disclosure itself, since the disclosure.

Grace:

No, it still is.

Greg:

But I do...and I do love my son.

Greg:

But I do...I really mean this, if I could go back to 1981 when he was born and change a gene or whatever it was that made him this way, but I wouldn't be sure that he would be the same Scott that we had for 18 years at that time, I really wouldn't change him.

Greg:

It's really changed my...I feel embarrassed about how I used to make fun of this.

Greg:

I have a lot of empathy for parents who go through this.

Carol:

I think that was another thing that probably helped us adjust quite well to see that all of these people that he's brought home with him or that we've met when we've gone up to see him are just nice people like he is. We're not looking at people like what I had seen when I was working. So in a way that was good.

Sarah:

Well, I've tried. It was, it wasn't easy.

Sarah:

I don't know, it's a fact of life now so...and he's such a good person.

Sarah:

It's been re-written, but not cheerfully.

Sarah:

They're both hard-working and honest and generous and almost to a fault. And it's just, it makes me thankful and it makes me upset with myself about things I wish.

Sarah:

How accepting and all of that.

Linda:

I think the main thing I've had to do is that I've just had to put myself in the straight person's...like what a relationship's like. It's really not that much different besides other people perceiving it. When she's had love affairs gone awry or something, like when I'm trying to be supportive to her, it's like "Oh, this is what it's like." I just have to kind of translate for me in my head. A girl she broke up with that kept bothering her and bothering her and it's like "If this was a guy doing this I would already have kicked his ass."

Karen:

Getting past the aspirations you have for your child is the hardest. And understanding that they're your dreams and not your child's dreams, and you have to listen to your child's dreams and expectations.

APPENDIX P

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 5

What is the “ideal” scenario in which a parent would prefer to have his or her child’s sexual orientation disclosed?

1. The parent describes any changes that he or she would make to the coming out scenario.

Grace:

I suppose for me maybe having a little more information. A little better understanding of the progression of things. Maybe a little more understanding of how somebody comes to the realization, how they work through the process. I mean obviously, okay obviously he had six months of counseling, after he graduated from college he said “I’m not coming home for the summer, I’m taking my bike and going to Ireland and I’m not coming home until the fall.” But, maybe in sharing, whether it was maybe in a letter that he might have written to talk about his experiences and coming to the realization that he was gay.

Steven:

No, not really.

Steven:

But, I don’t think that there was anything that he did that could have made it gone any better. There’s a lot of different ways he could have done it, but I, its just, it would have been out of character for him not to do it the way it was.

Diana:

I wish that I had known more. Been more enlightened. And I apologized to him later for anything that I had ever said about gays that was hurtful.

Diana:

I think he did a very good job considering what he had to say.

Greg:

I think probably, he probably would have been a little less tense if we didn’t do it at Starbucks. I remember the fear of someone else hearing...we should have had dinner and maybe just sat by the pool.

Greg:

Yeah, selfishly finding a place that would minimize my fear of somebody hearing.

Carol:

I can't imagine a way different than the way it was presented.

Carol:

Maybe that he had told me sooner.

Tom:

Well, I can't really think of anything.

Tom:

I just can't think of a better scenario. It just...I think it was fine.

Sarah:

Probably not much different than it was with him and me one on one. And I can understand why he told me first before his dad. I think he just kind of needed to test the waters a bit.

Sarah:

I don't know...trust me...there's no ideal situation to hear that in. But if it's true than you need to know.

Holly:

In fact I wish Gwen would have told me earlier. But she told me as soon as she decided.

Linda:

Maybe just a little more formal, "Mom, dad, I have to talk to you." I would have liked that just a little bit better. Because when she told me I was dealing with so much emotionally with her leaving. It was a little more overwhelming.

Karen:

I wish in some ways she had told me earlier.

Karen:

I think it's really obvious because the major thing was having me be a week or so at home first before coming to me.

Karen:

I'd say the timing was a little bit off and I think that for any parent the kids have to let them digest what they've come to understand.

2. The parent shares advice for children who are preparing to come out.

Grace:

Other than to say, “Hey, I’ve given this a lot of thought. I’ve got to live my life the way, the hand that was dealt me. I’ve got to be true to myself.” I mean we have some friends whose daughter married and then discovered...I think that must have been really difficult, to find out that way.

Grace:

And as soon as you know the better, to me.

Diana:

I would tell them to start up front by saying “I love you very much and I don’t want to hurt you but I do have something I have to say. And I have to tell you out of respect to you and because we’ve always had an honest relationship and because I want to have an honest relationship with you.” And then I guess I’d just say it. And I guess, Scott asked us to...I think Greg asked him what are we supposed to do? And Scott said “Just love me anyway.” And that was a good answer.

Diana:

I wouldn’t blame the parents, because they’re already doubting it and hurting and questioning it themselves.

Diana:

So whatever you don’t say “It’s your fault” Because they already hurt.”

Greg:

When you do tell them, tell them. Don’t beat around the bush. Say “Hey mom and dad I’m gay.” The other thing is, I think, it is, try to figure out how your parents will react to it, and back to your earlier question you need to give your dad or mom a head’s up. You don’t need to just drop it on them without prior warning. And pick your place.

Greg:

I really do think it’s best to tell both parents together. I think because most parents will work off each other. I think that’s better in most cases, and just get to the point. The other think I would say, what Scott did, is just shut up and listen, and it’s going to be a long several days and you’re going to have to listen to every cockamamie thing you’ve ever read about. “Are you bi-sexual? Are you sure? Is this a joke?” Just don’t get angry, because they’re grieving. Your parents are gonna...its, your child is basically dieing for a period of time.

Greg:

Don’t make light of it. Don’t make it a joke, or “Hey, guess what?” Be serious and...be serious, don’t make it a joke and...oh shoot, I can’t....just be serious with it.

Greg:

I think I would have been much more upset if it would have been “Hey let’s go to Starbucks” and then sat down and “Hey mom and day, I’m gay.”

Carol:

I would think just to try and be as loving and as up front as you can be.

Carol:

So I don’t know if you could really...other than just be honest. “This is the way it is and I still love you and I’m still me.”

Carol:

I think it would be better to come out to them rather than just letting them find out.

Judy:

I’d say honesty.

Judy:

For me, just like at home or someplace that we’re together.

Judy:

Prefacing it to the parent, that you’re grateful to the parents for their qualities and how they’ve raised you, the child. And it’s because of the way they were raised that they were able to be who they are completely, and that that is a gift. “Thank you for this gift and you’ve allowed me to be who I am and I want to share with you that I’m gay and I want to thank you for raising me so I knew who I was.”

Judy:

And you could say “I know that you’ve raised me to be happy and because of that fact, being gay is what makes me happy.” Because all parents want their kid to be happy I think and want them to be fulfilled. So if you say to the parent “You’ve done all of those things and you’ve done it all right.” Because I know some parents can’t quite accept it and think “Oh what have I done wrong” but really what they’ve done is something right. They’ve allowed their child to know who they really are.

Judy:

And say, “I want to say thank-you for letting me feel comfortable enough that I can share this with you. You’re really incredible parents and I’m sitting here talking to you about this.”

Judy:

I guess not...you wouldn’t want to be defensive about it or apologetic about it.

Judy:

Not being defensive, not being apologetic. Not thinking that...not going in with a negative attitude or not going in expecting that they're going to be put down or not accepted.

Tom:

If I heard anti-gay stuff in the house that would be like "Oh my God, how did I tell them?" If there's fag jokes or whatever...so I don't know, it would depend on what the vibe of the house is. But I would think just, if you think you're sure sooner is better than later. And just take the bull by the horns and "This is me, I'm a member of the family." And just try to empower them. Try to make them feel empowered and if this is indeed you and you're pretty sure of it, try to just help them feel the power that this is okay. And just try to stay centered and stay strong and let them react and if there's love in the family at all then hopefully they'll come around.

Tom:

I would warn them against trying to put it in the parents face too much. I would warn them against putting their parents in an awkward situation.

Tom:

Tell whichever one you're closest too, tell them in private and hopefully it will evolve and be accepted. Don't put it in their face and don't put out there when they've pissed you off so much that you have to."

Sarah:

Uh...I guess be gently about it. Don't...one thing I lucked out about when Brent told me...he'd been wearing a bracelet that I'd noticed for awhile when he'd been home. It was a rainbow bracelet. And I didn't know what the significance of it was before. And now that I think back on it he was kind of defensive about it at first.

Sarah:

So I think being not defensive.

Sarah:

When you find this out it's almost like having a death in the family. You go through the seven stages of grief. You grieve and you're angry and it's true. And I think the child has to accept that and has to be prepared for whatever emotion is going to come pouring out.

Sarah:

And probably having the PFLAG brochures and support groups.

Sarah:

So just be prepared for different reactions from each parent. Because they could react differently from each other.

Sarah:

Not to go into the boyfriend/girlfriend thing. Just to keep it “This is me I’m talking about” Not how they’re involved with somebody. You kind of know that it’s true but you don’t want to hear it right away.

Sarah:

Don’t do it over the phone. Don’t do it because you feel like you’re forced into it.

Sarah:

Yeah, don’t come blurting it out when...yeah. And I’m sure she would tell you the same thing. Not the ideal way.

Holly:

I think I would tell them that it’s important that they address that parents insecurities first, saying “You were a great dad.

Holly:

So that would be my concern is what if you didn’t have a great relationship with your parents and you wanted to come out to them. I think that I would tell them that their main thing should be themselves first. That as long as they know...that they should say “I’m happy with this. I’m happy with my life and my choices and I want you to be happy for me to, and if you’re not then just...because I’d really like for us to be close and I’d really like to be a family and I’d like for you to accept my partner, whoever they are.” And it sounds a little cliché-ish but I think that if they go in angry, I know Gwen told me some people do it through e-mail or voice-mail, that would not be my choice as a mother to hear it that way because you wouldn’t be able to see their face. I was able to see her and see how happy she was and how relieved she was and how much better she felt about herself since she made the decision, so I think if they can try and get out of themselves a little bit and try to get into their parent’s point of view. But it is hard and they may blame themselves and they may come from a background where they are staunchly Baptist or Methodist and their belief system their whole life has been that this is a sin against God.

Holly:

So I think they’re just going to have to accept them and say “This is the way I am and I want you to accept me.”

Holly:

They need to tell them because 90% of the time they’ve already guessed anyway, so I think they should just put their own needs first and just go ahead and do it.

Holly:

So I think that you’re going to have to put your life first.

Holly:

I would definitely say stay away from any sort of abusive situation that could happen, in any situation. Even though they're hurtful that's a whole other issue.

Holly:

I would stay away from divorce or poor choices that the parents may have made or any religious issues, because I really think that the parents probably did the best they could. And throwing that in their face, yeah. Because I mean if, if they can just let go, I mean it's so hard.

Linda:

If you know your parents are supportive I think you can just sit down and have a nice tea with them...something a bit more formal. But if you don't know where your parents are I think the hit and run is probably better.

Linda:

Because if your parents are going to be horrible about it, I don't even know if I'd want to even tell them.

Linda:

I think just to keep it general. Parents don't want to know real personal details, like kids don't want to know personal details about their parents.

Karen:

One thing that's very important and I tell this to _____, think how many years it's taken you to realize what you are. Don't expect your parents to suddenly understand in a week, a few months, or a few years what maybe it's taken you four or five or more years to understand. You have to give people time to adjust, to work through it. Particularly if they're like myself and had no clue.

Karen:

The most important thing I've already said, and that's not expecting your parents to jump to your side.

Karen:

They have to live through their expectations, and I think the child has to realize that every parent has expectations for their small baby on up to adulthood. I think one of the most important things that a child needs to understand is to have some information that's there. Nichole had some literature; she had the books sitting right next to me.

Karen:

So a lot of it I think is being in a relaxed situation where you have the information, you've research it a lot, you're pretty sure this is the case, and realize your parents are

going to be in shock, they'll try to talk you out of it, they're going to wonder how someone else could do this to you and blaming if there is someone in a relationship.

Karen:

But if there have been little hints that have been dropped along that maybe they'll be more observant than I was, and maybe it wouldn't be as much of a shock to them.

Karen:

Explain what PFLAG is. I think it's important for the child to think about how the parent could react and why they're reacting that way. For the child to understand where they're coming from.

Karen:

I would not mention if you had a boyfriend or a girlfriend because right now it's enough for the parent to understand and sort out what their expectations are for you. And to know that you now have a partner would be something they don't need to know right now. The important thing is to lay out the facts and the understanding and not go into that type of relationship. Don't explain more than what...let your parents ask the questions, then respond. Don't give them more than they can chew at the time.

Karen:

And I would say if they are in a relationship let the parents understand and work with this for a while. Don't put the relationship in front of them.

Karen:

I think another good thing to do would be to get information on the Bible, because some parents will start quoting it. So it's important to get that information as well to look at, because this is what they're concerned about, they're afraid their pastor is going to tell them. So to find some research on that would be good. I think the hardest thing for parents is to realize they really have not changed and no one has forced them. God has made them somehow for some reason a different way than the parent is but there's nothing wrong with that.

3. The parent discusses thoughts about the child's age at disclosure.

Grace:

Had he been much younger, in high school for example, and again, maybe it's because I'm not well enough...I hear in ALLIES you know, "I probably knew I was gay when I was in second grade" and I'm going "What? How could you know that?" And I guess if Brian had said that to me as a Junior in high school, I'm not sure that I would have been convinced of that.

Diana:

I think I would have been more concerned that he did not know what he was doing. And I would have been more concerned about people finding out.

Carol:

But when I think back on that I would have been even less sure that he knew what he was talking about than I was.

Judy:

And I guess I have to admit that I don't know enough, but I thought part of me was thinking "Can she know already?" I mean that was my sense also inside. She was a couple weeks shy of fourteen, so I was thinking "Can you know already?" Because she hadn't gotten her period yet. I knew her hormones were kicking in and stuff and so I thought "Can you know this?" But I didn't even verbalize it.

Tom:

And it's like, whether, this is her, she's fourteen and it's like, there's lots of things you go through and I think...I'm just trying to speak for me and I think there's lots of exploring to do and she may well be a lesbian for life or she may well drift into other venues or styles of life or be bi or find some guy she clicks with or finds a woman she clicks with, and just anything is fine.

Tom:

Because I think she's got a very strong sense of self and so I trust her but as much as I can trust any fourteen year old to know themselves.

Sarah:

I think that the timing was okay. I just would have worried about him more because of all of the hate crimes and the gay bashings and all of that.

Linda:

He asked her "Are you sure it's not a trend?" And several people have said that and I've always said, "When you were 15 were you sure you were straight?."

Karen:

So I think for me it would have been something I could have helped her at an earlier time when she really didn't have the friends and people didn't understand the overseas thing, they didn't want to hear about it.

APPENDIX Q

DATA UNITS FOR RESEARCH RELATED THEME

What does a parent experience as a child discloses his or her sexual orientation?

1. The parent describes the events that immediately preceded the disclosure.

Grace:

But he had...we'd come home from work and he'd had a really nice dinner that he'd prepared.

Grace:

And we came in here to kind of just visit, and like I said he even selected the music and the whole thing. And we were just speaking about general stuff here in the living room. Steven I think led him to it.

Steven:

Well, we came in and, in fact he had called as I recall and said, "What time are you all going to be here? I'm going to do something nice for dinner."

Steven:

And when we came in, of course, he had this wonderful dinner prepared, and had two kinds of wine setting out.

Steven:

And then we sat down, and dinner was pretty normal, except for the fact that he was really pushing wine.

Steven:

I still didn't, I think, at that point didn't really know, didn't have any idea that he was going to choose that time. And so after dinner he came in and put on the Hillary Stagg CD and said, "Come on in. I'll clean up dishes. Let's just sit and talk", and so we did.

Diana:

So we had a nice dinner and then the three of us got in the car and went off to Starbucks, which my husband goes to a great deal and I'm sure that's why my son chose it.

Diana:

So, we sat down at the Starbucks with our drinks, and my husband and I got the soft chairs and my son takes the hard, straight chair and we're sitting there and he just said "I need to tell you something."

Greg:

So, it was his freshman year, it was spring, he was on spring break, and it was only about the second or third time he came home from school.

Greg:

So I remember he came home from spring break and we were in the back yard barbequing, my wife really likes it when I barbeque. And so I was out there cooking hamburgers or steaks or whatever, and Scott usually sits out there with me, and this time he was out there and said "After we eat, why don't we go out to Starbucks or something. I have something I'd like to tell you."

Greg:

Yeah, I remember coming in after I had finished cooking and I told Diana, "Well, Scott wants to take us to Starbucks, he has something important to tell us." And I normally wouldn't say that.

Greg:

So we went to one of several Starbucks in _____ and we went to our favorite one, and I remember he was sort of quiet in the car and he was quiet too.

Greg:

It's about a two mile drive and I remember that it was long drive and I was sort of dreading what he had to say to us. He was pretty quiet. So we walked in and we all ordered our drinks. Scott and Diana sat in the corner; there were a couple of stuffed chairs in the corner. So they went off to sit while I waited for the drinks. And the three drinks came up and I picked them up and took them over to the table, and we sat and I remember that we chatted. There was some small talk. Scott was obviously...Diana and I were sitting in two overstuffed chairs, and Scott was sitting on a wooden chair that he had sort of pulled over from a table. And I remember that his body language...I think he was kind of pale, and he was obviously very concerned. There was a little bit of small talk, and I couldn't stand it so I said "Well Scott, what is it that you want to tell us?" And I think there was a slight pause, and I don't think there were very many people in there. I've always wondered what would have happened if the place was packed, but we sort of had the corner to ourselves.

Carol:

Basically, I think he had just come home from school.

Carol:

I know it was at night. He may have been out working and come back.

Judy:

I remember...she had been gone to this camp, called Camp _____. It's a camp for girls and it's really neat.

Judy:

They do a lot of art and dream work and goddess things and it's like to have girls really bond and be with each other rather than compete and do crazy stuff. And they talk about sex and they talk about health, and they do hiking, rituals, but it's a really really neat thing.

Judy:

So I guess, and she had just been back a day or two, so I guess my mindset was I had missed her.

Judy:

But I had missed her, so I was just really open to her being back and open to listening more, and so I was just really positive.

Judy:

It was just something that emerged. I was not even anticipating it at all.

Judy:

We were sitting on the couch.

Judy:

And I can't tell exactly how it led into this...she was in a very open position because she had been to this camp.

Judy:

We were sitting on the couch and she said, just somehow she started talking about how she and _____...this was a girl that she had known in elementary school and I think another one or two other girls, had gotten together and I can't exactly say the order of how she came out, had gotten together at this camp and talked and this other girl, I think her mother was gay and she was talking about that and that she thought she was gay and then _____ said "I think I'm bi-sexual" and Mia said "I'm pretty sure I'm gay."

Tom:

Well, she came out to her mom, and then her mom told me. And then it was almost like she assumed that my wife was going to tell me so it was never a big deal. But she finally, one evening at the dinner table, my wife sort of prompted her "Well don't you have to something to tell dad?" She turned to me and goes "I'm gay, all right?" or something like that.

Sarah:

Well, he came home one weekend and his father had gone someplace and I was down in my sewing room and he come in and sat down, and just told me. He was prepared though. He had the PFLAG brochures and phone numbers and everything for me and I was kind of impressed with that, that he was trying to help me. And...the reason he told

us was not because he necessarily wanted us to know...it was because he met some guy that lived out of town, and had run up a huge telephone bill. The other guy had told him he was going to pay and he didn't pay it. And Brent didn't have any money to pay it, so he had to get the money from us.

Sarah:

She and a friend of hers from high-school had gone to see the Lillith Fair, and it was a male friend. And they were going to stay in a hotel, separate rooms, and she was going to call me when she got there. And she didn't call and she didn't call, and my husband was working out of town and I was worried about her. So I called the motel to see if they had checked in, and the girl at the desk said yes, so I asked for the room and she told me there was only one room. So I was upset. I thought "I trust you and this is what you do." So she connected me to the room and the boy answered and I asked to speak to Ashley and I was just livid. I talked to him and said "She's only 17 years old, she's underage and you're going to be in a lot of trouble." And he was just stuttering, he didn't know what to say. I was really going off on him. So she got on the phone and she was crying and I said "I'm going to have your brother come get you" because Brent lived in _____. And she's crying and she kept telling me "It's not what you think" and I said "Don't tell me what I think. I know what I think and I know what it is."

Holly:

They went to bed and we were going to my parents for the Fourth of July and we were taking two cars for some reason, I don't know why, and her dad said "Why don't you ride with Gwen and I'll meet you all there." So I thought "Okay." And I think they had set it up so that she could talk to me, because he knew the night before. And we got in and she was kind of trembling, her hand, and I was like "Gwen are you okay?" and she said "I'm fine mom." And about five or six miles down the road she was like (big inhale of breath) "Well." And I was like "Okay."

Linda:

I can't remember what we were talking about, probably the same thing about "Are you sure you're not?" and she kind of got emotional and said "I think I am mom."

Karen:

So I got the news as I was coming in from Kuwait at about 12:30 in the morning, and I was just jet-lagged, and I said, "This is just not the time to talk about it."

Karen:

We were living over-seas at that time in Kuwait and I would come back in for about two months at a time and then I would go back then I'd come in for another three. So I had just been in the country not even 24 hours when she decided to tell me. It was maybe only 14 hours or something like that.

Karen:

I think she started out with that she had something really important that she wanted to share with me and that she'd already shared it with her brother and she was hoping that I would be very receptive and she actually had left little tidbits out for me but I went right to bed and never saw them. But I would say she was a little nervous and I figured it was something it was very, very important and something that she was very hesitant on sharing but it was something she felt she wanted to do.

2. The parent states the exact words that a child used to disclose his or her sexuality.

Grace:

And we were talking about relationships and marriage and Steven asked the question "Well what are you looking for?" or something....I don't know if he used the word marriage or what he used, but he really led, he opened it up for Brian just to say, you know "I'm gay."

Steven:

And he, as I recall he just sort of blurted it out, and said, "I've been wanting to share something with you. And, you know, I think I'm gay." And I said, "Well, that's not something you think you are." In fact, I think what I said was "Brian, that's like being pregnant, you either are or you aren't." So he said "Okay, I'm gay."

Diana:

We were like "Okay" and he said "Well, I'm gay."

Diana:

He just said "I'm gay."

Greg:

And he said, and I can't remember the exact words, but he said "There's something I want to tell you. I'm gay." He just said it.

Carol:

Just plain out. "This is the way it is." "Are you sure?" "Yes, I'm sure."

Judy:

We were sitting on the couch and she said, just somehow she started talking about how she and _____...this was a girl that she had known in elementary school and I think another one or two other girls, had gotten together and I can't exactly say the order of how she came out, had gotten together at this camp and talked and this other girl, I think her mother was gay and she was talking about that and that she thought she was gay and then _____ said "I think I'm bi-sexual" and Mia said "I'm pretty sure I'm gay." And somehow in this group...and she told me "Mom, I'm gay."

Tom:

But she finally, one evening at the dinner table, my wife sort of prompted her “Well don’t you have to something to tell dad?” She turned to me and goes “I’m gay, all right?” or something like that.

Sarah:

She said “No mom” and she was crying, and she said “I think I’m gay.”

Holly:

And she just said “Mom I just want you to know I’m gay” and I said, I remember exactly what I said, I said “Oh God, it’s all my fault isn’t it?” And she said “I knew you’d say that.”

Linda:

I can’t remember what we were talking about, probably the same thing about “Are you sure you’re not?” and she kind of got emotional and said “I think I am mom. Are you okay with that?” And I told her that her dad and I had talked about it and we thought so.

3. The parent describes what happened immediately following the disclosure.

Grace:

So I’m not sure really...actually I’m not sure how the rest of evening went. After that, I can well remember that but after that I don’t remember much else.

Diana:

And he said, “What girl?” And my husband turned to me and said “Look. I’m sorry, but there’s no way anybody would have missed that girl, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful to you.” And so Scott said he noticed...and we were asking things like “Well what makes you think you are?” And he said “Well I’ve wondered a long time.”

Diana:

We went on and we talked probably an hour or two. We talked a long time up there. And he told us that he had realized that he had a problem at college when everybody, the movie had ended and everyone was talking about the girls in the movie, and he was thinking about the guys in the movie and couldn’t remember what the girls looked like. So I thought “Okay.” My husband asked him if he had, “If you see a guy do you have thoughts?” And he said he does, so I thought “Okay.” And he said he wasn’t, he said kissing a girl was like kissing a sister, there was just nothing there. So we went on through that, and he just sat there and went through stuff like that, on and on. And we went home and he went to bed. And it was the start of spring break and I remember thinking “I don’t know how we’re going to make the week.” Because I just wanted him to go away. I just almost didn’t want to see him, and I don’t know why. And we were supposed to go see my best friend the next day in Dallas. And my husband and I sat up

and talked about whether we should go or not because they had a son a year younger and they usually share a bedroom. And now that we know this, what do we do?

Diana:

My husband could not sleep. I finally got up and took a couple of Tylenol PM and knocked myself out. Because I thought, “You know what, I need to sleep.” I don’t think my husband slept. He woke me up at daybreak, and we went out by the pool and talked. And talked before Scott got up. And he said, “I’m getting Scott up. We’ve got to talk.” So we did. Out there before daybreak.

Diana:

So my husband got on the internet and ordered probably a couple hundred dollars worth of books delivered over night on everything in the world. Went to work, and made an appointment for a counselor through work, because we wanted to know how to tell the girls, or if to tell the girls, or what to do, still thinking that me might could change it, or get him to pretend.

Greg:

I remember Diana made some sort of surprise remark like “Oh” or “That’s interesting” or something. She just, she didn’t get mad. You could tell it was a ton of bricks that fell on her.

Greg:

And I really can’t remember much of what was said after he said that.

Greg:

We weren’t there very long. And we came back and sat, we had a pool at our last house, so we came back and sat outside on our pool furniture.

Carol:

I don’t know if it was that night or later when I asked if he wanted to see a psychologist. And he said if I wanted to go too.

Carol:

And the doctor said everyone seemed close to normal to him.

Judy:

And then I remember sharing, since she shared, because she has some young women/adults that had been like friends or aunts or something who don’t have kids and I preceded to tell her you know, “Oh, you know _____. She’s bi-sexual.” And she said “She is?” It was like sharing people that she knew who were gay but I had never said that before. So I said, “if you needed someone to talk to”, being that I’m straight. So it went on like that.

Sarah:

My husband came home and he came down to where we were sitting and talking and Brent told him. And I can remember, I think he was sitting in my chair, my husband was, and I stood there with my hands on his shoulders, and I couldn't look at him?

Sarah:

I don't know what else to say.

Sarah:

So I called my son, and I was crying. And he said "Is it Ashley." And I said "Yes" And he said "Is she pregnant?" and I said "I wish." And he knew what I was saying then. And I shouldn't have said it like that. But that's not what we expected.

Sarah:

He didn't call thank goodness, so I just talked to Brent for a while. It wasn't good. So she came home a couple of days later after the concert and just sat there like nothing had happened. I said "Well don't we need to talk about something?" and she said "Well what?" and I said "What you told me on the phone the other night." It was like "No big deal mom."

Holly:

I was just more processing trying to fast-forward to what her life is going to be like. It's the same thing if you have an interracial relationship. It's like "Oh my God. Do you realize what you're going to have to face?" There's that scary part of it. So that's why I was scared for her. Because she's a very strong person. I mean you wouldn't know it. She doesn't come across that way but she's a very strong person.

Karen:

So a good night's sleep and a big cup of tea and we started the next day, and it probably went about three to four hours in conversation...the usual "Are you sure? When did you think you were?"...all of those things, just to get some information. But then I...a couple days later we went to her apartment in _____ and she had some books; Ellen DeGeneres' mother Betty and some other ones and I asked if I could take them home. She gave me about four books and I devoured them.

4. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were either behavioral or physical in nature.

Steven:

I think I probably responded first and said "Well, this is not a surprise to me. I've known that for a long, long time. Or at least I've felt that. And I'm glad you have finally chosen to share that with us. That you have finally dealt with that to the point that you're comfortable in saying that." And I think I also said to him "I'm really sorry that it took

this long for you to decide that the time was right.” Then Grace responded, and her response was “Well we love you very much. This makes no difference to us.” And she has a particular kind of voice that when we’re dealing with something really special with the kids like that, then she goes into it.

Steven:

And, you know “We love you and care for you and this makes no difference to us and our relationship.”

Steven:

And I think I said something about that I was concerned about his future relationships because he was always been very much involved in the family and very committed to family, and this was going to mean that his family was a little different.

Diana:

I remember almost blanking out. It was almost surreal, almost like I was floating or something.

Diana:

You know what I mean, maybe he doesn’t know any better. And he said he had more time to think about it than we had. And of course my husband was like “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” And of course he kept trying to press him for more detail, like “Do you find yourself attracted?” My husband kept asking him things like, “What about that girl in line in front of you?”

Diana:

Maybe he just hadn’t had enough girls, he had...my husband said that all guys question themselves at one moment in their life. So maybe he just didn’t know.

Diana:

It was more like nausea, floating. Like, I don’t know whether...it was just like you’ve been hit in the stomach kind of. And everything was calm. No one raised their voice. Nobody argued. It was extremely calm.

Greg:

And I sort of felt that I withdrew a little bit.

Greg:

I didn’t want to talk a lot about it there. I felt very uncomfortable.

Greg:

And I remember thinking, and I think I got...I didn’t get angry, I think I was very upset, and saying “Scott, and what does this mean? You want to be a pediatrician.” I think one of the things I feel most bad about is I said “What mother or father would want to bring

their kid to a gay doctor. You've ruined your career." And I remember at point starting to be fearful for Scott.

Greg:

I think I cried a couple of times when I said "Your career is ruined" "What about the sexual habits. You're going to get sick and kill yourself." I remember crying about that.

Judy:

And then I just smiled and she was telling me and of course I told her how I totally accept who she is and I did tell her about how I had this...I said "This is going to sound odd." And I told her the story of the intuitive feelings that she was going to be gay.

Tom:

And it was like, well I said "Thank you for telling me. Of course mom told me. And any support you need..." And I sort of said what I just told you about life being long and there's lots of different things in it.

Sarah:

And I lost it. I cried.

Sarah:

And I said "What?" I honestly don't remember the rest of the conversation. That's all that I can remember. She's crying and I'm crying and it was not a good experience.

Holly:

And she just said "Mom I just want you to know I'm gay" and I said, I remember exactly what I said, I said "Oh God, it's all my fault isn't it?" And she said "I knew you'd say that."

Holly:

I burst into tears.

Holly:

And I was like "It's because I divorced your dad. It's because I haven't been a good mother" and she started laughing.

Holly:

I was really glad that she finally told me because I knew that she hadn't for a long time, and then I started laughing while I was crying and I said "Gwen, you tired to tell me" and she said "Yeah I really did." And I said "Man, I see all of those signs now" and she said "Yeah I did mom." And we just kind of talked about the nightmares.

Karen:

And I remember taking her into my arms and saying “I love you. Nothing has changed. You’re still the wonderful young person you’ve always been.” I think it was just a hard thing for her.

Karen:

So I think my main thing was to learn more and understand where she was coming from and also learning how I could help her because I knew this was going to be a very difficult road in our society and particular in Texas.

Karen:

I wanted to learn and I wanted to understand.

5. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were emotional in nature.

Grace:

Yeah, just a real shock. Yeah...and sadness, I cried.

Steven:

So, you know, I think in the one sense I felt relief that it was finally out on the table from his perspective and he was willing and able to articulate that, and would have the trust in the family to do that.

Steven:

You know, I think I also felt, you know, a tinge of great remorse at that point because life is hard enough, and I think I said this to him somewhere during the conversation.

Steven:

I think I felt that real sense of relief.

Greg:

I think that’s when the embarrassment came in.

Greg:

And it was a fear for him and an embarrassment for me.

Greg:

For me there was that huge sense of embarrassment and a sense of failure.

Greg:

There was no anger on my part at that point.

Greg:

But I remember obviously total shock, fear, almost a desperation just to get out.

Greg:

And I remember thinking, and I think I got...I didn't get angry, I think I was very upset, and saying "Scott, and what does this mean?"

Greg:

I was still very embarrassed about myself.

Greg:

For me there was that huge sense of embarrassment and a sense of failure.

Judy:

And I just, it was like, in a way it was a shock, but a recognized shock, because like I said I'd had this incredible intuition and it was almost like "Oh my God, my intuition was right." And I was shocked and surprised, in way, even though you might say I was prepared, you might say.

Judy:

I wasn't that way." And she said that she had always known. And that's what kind of surprised me that she had always known.

Judy:

I mean I was scared. It's going to be harder; it's not going to be as easy.

Judy:

And any mother, you want to protect your kid and so it's like, it's just yeah, a little bit of sadness also.

Tom:

Well...it was just sort of a shrug for me really.

Sarah:

Oh, I was totally devastated.

Sarah:

And yeah, it upset me that he thought we didn't love him enough, that we would maybe shut the door.

Holly:

I felt guilty. I wasn't upset at her.

Karen:

I was shocked.

Karen:

And it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Karen:

But I felt this tremendous relief.

Karen:

So I think my main thing was concern for her, for her safety.

Karen:

I think that was really the main thing was the fear angle.

6. The parent discusses immediate reactions to the disclosure that were cognitive in nature.

Grace:

Yeah, I think it was just, you know it was like, I can't believe what I'm hearing.

Steven:

Number one was I was pleased that he finally had decided to do that because obviously that's a step of him getting on with his life. And it's a statement of his trust and love in his family that he was willing to do that.

Diana:

I remember thinking, "I'm not even sure he knows what he's talking about."

Diana:

And we still not convinced that night that he knew what he was talking about.

Diana:

So I'm thinking "He's not going to have babies."

Diana:

And it was the start of spring break and I remember thinking "I don't know how we're going to make the week". Because I just wanted him to go away. I just almost didn't want to see him, and I don't know why.

Diana:

And I remember thinking, "Well, it's done now. There's no going back. We're done."

Diana:

And just hearing that, I thought "Well you know what, if he has no choice and God made him that way, then who am I to question that". So I felt better.

Greg:

And I remember “Oh my God, it’s exactly what I thought it was.”

Greg:

I remember thinking “Oh my God, did someone hear him?” There was probably a feeling like “How can I get out of here?” And not so much me, but how could we all get out of there.

Greg:

It was just like I wanted all of to escape and maybe hoping that he would actually say “Just kidding.” Maybe, “There’s something else I have to tell you.” “This is part of a psychology experiment.”

Greg:

It was like the whole...all your dreams for your son just blew up right there.

Greg:

“You’ve ruined your career.” And I remember at point starting to be fearful for Scott.

Greg:

And I remember being fearful for...we’re pretty strong Christians, and I remember thinking “Oh my God, he’s going to hell.”

Greg:

And another feeling I had, I’ll be honest with you, I think this was the first day or two he was home on a week long spring break. I remember, and I’m so embarrassed about this, I remember thinking “I wish this was next week and that he would go back to school.” I just, it’s not so much I didn’t want him around because I was mad at him, it was I suddenly felt the whole world was going to know about this if we walked in together and people would start pointing at him. So I remember thinking “I wish he would just go away.”

Greg:

It’s possibly that and possibly maybe denial that maybe he’ll come back next week and it would be a big joke. But it was just like not having him there, I guess I wouldn’t have to deal with it.

Carol:

I think...I don’t know how to say what I’m thinking...more like this was something that Phil, he was kind of a “cause” person, and he still is, and that this was something maybe that he thought...and had talked himself into, rather than, not thinking about feelings or anything, but just that it was something that he talked himself into.

Judy:

And I just, it was like, in a way it was a shock, but a recognized shock, because like I said I'd had this incredible intuition and it was almost like "Oh my God, my intuition was right." And I was shocked and surprised, in way, even though you might say I was prepared, you might say.

Judy:

Yes, like I said I was accepting but inside my heart it was also like, "Oh my God, this means her life is going to be a little bit harder."

Judy:

And it's just like well "This means we have to fight." I knew that...it meant that now it's personal, so now we have to get out there, my husband and I and fight more.

Tom:

It's like there's still a lot of hatred, there's still a lot of prejudice, but it's probably better than ever to be a gay kid than it ever has been.

Tom:

This is her destiny and it's like, I just, it's, I want her to be happy and if she ends up having women that she loves in her life than it's like, big deal.

Sarah:

And it wasn't so much...and I'm getting emotional now...and it wasn't so much that I was so upset about what he told me but that he thought we didn't love him enough.

Sarah:

I was praying my husband didn't call that night. I couldn't tell him over the phone and he would be able to tell I'd been crying.

Sarah:

I thought she was going to tell me she was pregnant and it flashed through my mind that she couldn't because she had just had a pregnancy test so she could go on a certain pill from her dermatologist. So she just had that, so I knew it wasn't that. It's amazing how so many thoughts can flash through your mind in a few seconds.

Holly:

I was convinced it was my fault. That I had not been a good role-model or I had not been a good mother or the fact that her father had left us when she was little.

Holly:

It probably seems very selfish but it was all about myself. I was thinking "I could have been a better mom" or something. Mostly it was the divorce...that I hadn't modeled a good marriage or that I could have done something. And the next thing I think...come to

think of it was “Oh my God...I hope she’s going to be happy. I hope this is going to work out for her.” Because I want her to have...I’ve always worried that she was never going to have a good full relationship because she’s pushed everybody away her whole life except for her sister.

Linda:

It was like “I’m going to have to watch what church I’m going to.”

Linda:

I guess the other part of it at that moment was “Oh, I won’t have a typical wedding for her.”

Karen:

And I just, I couldn’t think fast enough.

Karen:

I think the main thing was that I probably realized that there probably wouldn’t be any grandchildren through her...I have a son who is married.

Karen:

I think only it the respect it bothered me that now this was something I would have to face as a parent and something that was going to be really hard for her, something that I would have to be very strongly supportive of. I think that was really it. I don’t think it was anything that I felt really uncomfortable about.

Karen:

So I think every mother’s dream and her father’s as well was walking her down the isle and all of these things that we all do in our society, and I think that was the hardest thing was realizing that none of the normal things would be that way. There wouldn’t be bridal showers for them.

7. The parent discusses the child's response to the parent's reaction to the disclosure.

Grace:

And I think he said, you know “You can ask me any questions that you want to ask me.” But I really was so uninformed I guess about the gay lifestyle or about relationships or whatever.

Steven:

I think he really didn’t, had not understood that I had that strong sense for a long, long time.

Diana:

And one of the things he did say when he came out was that he respected us so much that he did not want to be dishonest with us.

Greg:

He handled it...he was very pained. And I remember in hindsight thinking that he was feeling empathy for us.

Greg:

Because we asked him how long he'd know this, and I think he said that he'd known it since he was four or five years old and he had struggled with it.

Greg:

He had prepped us very well before we went, he didn't beat around the bush, he just told us, and then he did a lot of listening. But he was very pained too. He was pained for us, and I think there was almost some sense of relief in his mind that he had done what he had to do and then he was waiting to see how we reacted. And he...it was a very brave thing for anyone to do.

Greg:

There was a sense of assurance about him that he would get through this, with or without us.

Greg:

And he was very exhausted.

Judy:

She was a little surprised but she just smiled.

Sarah:

He was very relieved. He didn't have to try and figure out how he was going to stay in school!

Holly:

I knew that was the first thing you'd say. That's why I haven't told you. Because I knew you'd blame yourself. I know that's the way you are."

Holly:

She said "I knew you would say that, but that's ridiculous. It has nothing to do with anything."

Holly:

I started laughing then because she started teasing me, saying “I don’t know. What else could be your fault mom? What else can we come up with?” But like I said we’ve always been really, really close.

Karen:

So in a lot of ways I was more open to things and I think that is why she was very relieved after she told me...started crying.

8. The parent describes his or her most vivid memory from the disclosure.

Grace:

Again I think it was Steven’s question and “What do you want out of a relationship” or “What do you want out of a marriage” or whatever. And then his expression, and him just coming right out with it.

Steven:

Especially when Grace responded the way she did.

Steven:

But I was pleased that Grace handled it so very, very well. Because there are things that she did that I’m very proud, of her love and caring for him and her concern for his welfare.

Steven:

So I was really, really pleased and relieved that she handled it so well and was so reaffirming.

Diana:

I guess...not a thing as much as just the fact that I was so impressed, even in all of the confusion and being so upset, I was so impressed with the way he handled himself. The way that he had obviously thought it through.

Diana:

And I felt sorry for him, and I told him that.

Greg:

The fact that he was so brave to tell us. The fact that he was so prepared. I think we could have said “Get the hell out of here. Pack up and never come back.” I think he was ready for that. I think he was...and the other perception was that he was grieving with us for what we lost.

Carol:

I think my concern about how his dad would feel, and his concern about how his dad would feel.

Judy:

Just that she said she was gay and that she knew for a long time.

Judy:

And her feeling of confidence, which was really good, and I think also, I think I remember saying something like “Well, you’ve chosen a better time to be gay.”

Sarah:

And I remember the one thing that really upset me...he said, and this was to me because his dad was still gone, that he would understand if we didn’t want to pay for school anymore.

Sarah:

Just the part where he talked about school. If we didn’t want to pay for it anymore and my reaction to that. It was kind of like, and this is not the same thing, but when my mom had breast cancer and had a mastectomy, and I cried and cried afterwards. And everyone thought that it was because of the mastectomy, and it wasn’t. It was because she was alive and had survived the surgery. And that was kind of the way this situation was. I wasn’t crying because of what he told me, but because of what he thought that we would do. That he would think that. It was hard.

Holly:

The only thing is really “Oh my God, it’s my fault.” That...she teases me about that still.

Linda:

I think more than anything else it was just finally knowing that she was gay.

Karen:

It was raining...I remember there was some rain.

VITA

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